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THE MAGAZINE

# Fantasy AND

# Science Fiction

26th Anniversary

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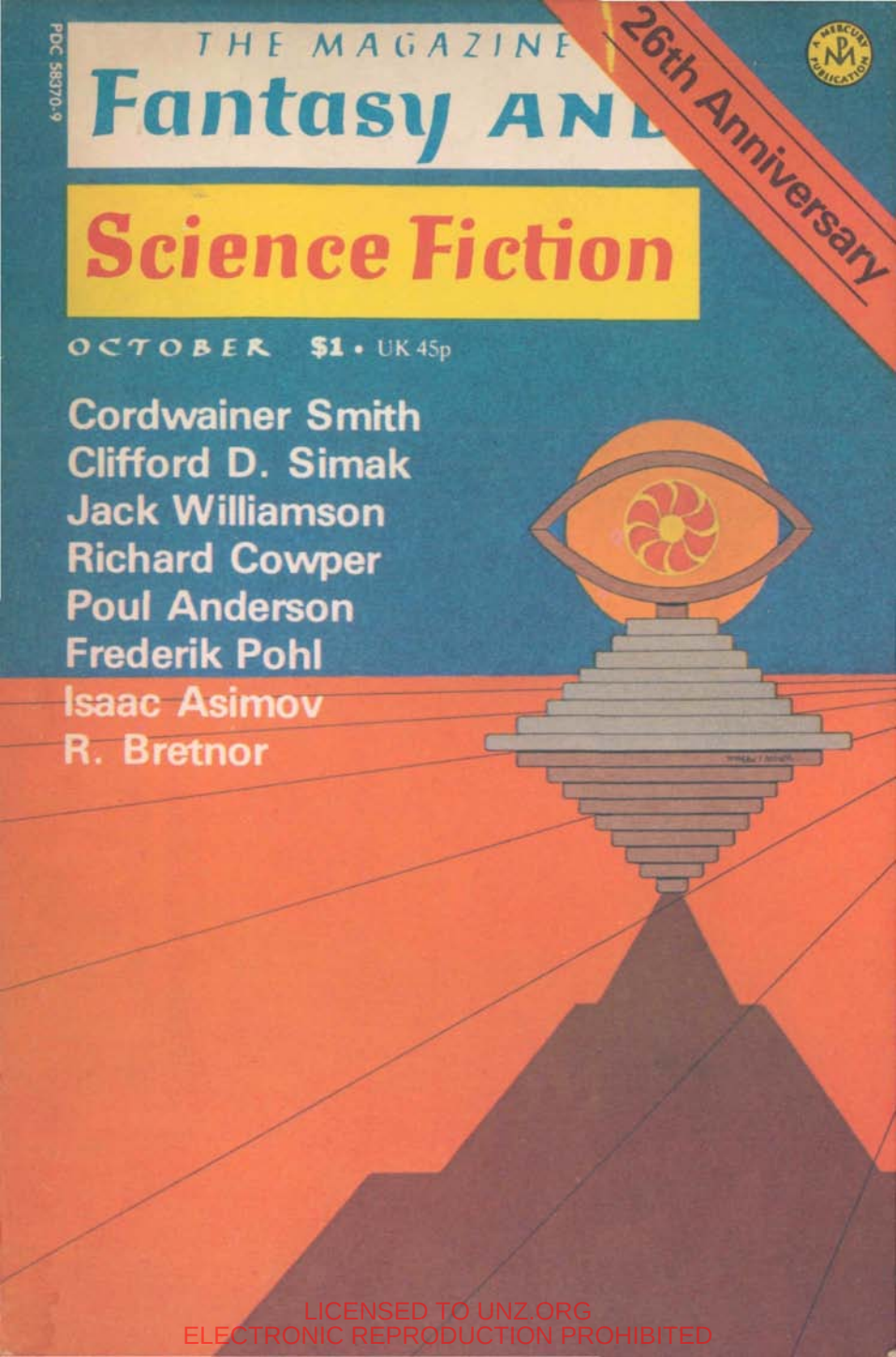

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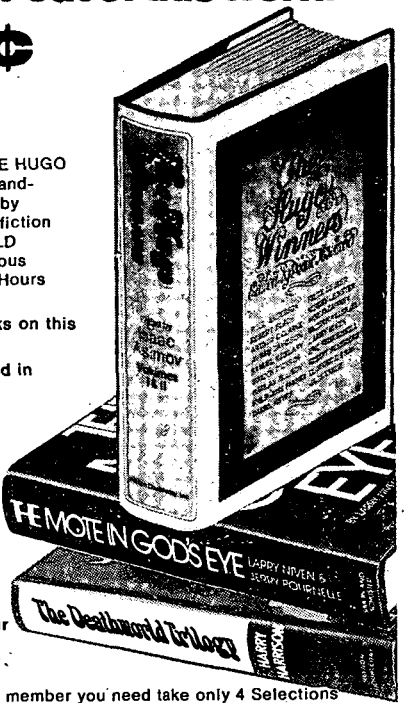


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# Fantasy and Science Fiction

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**OCTOBER • 26TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE**


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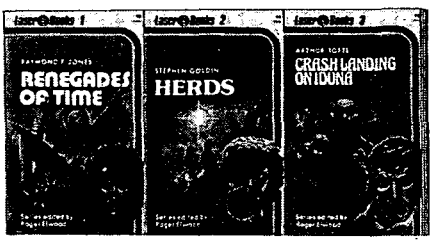


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**Richard Cowper is the pen name for John Middleton Murry, Jr., an Englishman who lives in South Wales and says of himself: "I was born in 1926 in the eclipsing shadow of an illustrious father. I took to writing as a young bird takes to flight – by reason of heredity. I regard science fiction as one of the few literary forms which are able to satisfy that appetite which Dr. Johnson identified for all time as 'the hunger of the imagination which preys upon life.'" His recent sf novels include *Clone* (Doubleday) and *The Twilight of Briareus* (John Day). This extraordinary story is his first appearance here and, as far as we know, in any sf magazine.**

# The Custodians

## by RICHARD COWPER

Although the monastery of Hautaire has dominated the Ix valley for more than twelve hundred years, compared with the Jurassic limestone to which it clings, it might have been erected yesterday. Even the megaliths which dot the surrounding hillside predate the abbey by several millennia. But if, geologically speaking, Hautaire is still a newcomer, as a human monument it is already impressively ancient. For the first two centuries following its foundation, it served the faithful as a pilgrims' sanctuary, then, less happily, as a staging post for the crusaders. By the 13th Century, it had already known both fat years and lean ones, and it was during one of the latter that, on a cool September afternoon in the year 1272, a grey-bearded, sunburnt man came striding up the white road which wound beside the brawling Ix and hammered on the abbey doors with the butt of his staff.

There were rumors abroad that plague had broken out again in the southern ports, and the eye which scrutinized the lone traveler through the grille was alert with apprehension. In response to a shouted request the man snorted, flung off his cloak, discarded his tattered leather jerkin, and raised his bare arms. Twisting his torso from side to side, he displayed his armpits. There followed a whispered consultation within; then, with a rattle of chains and a protest of iron bolts, the oak wicket gate edged inwards grudgingly, and the man stepped through.

The monk who had admitted him made haste to secure the door. "We hear there is plague abroad,



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brother," he muttered by way of explanation.

The man shrugged on his jerkin, looping up the leather toggles with deft fingers. "The only plague in these parts is ignorance," he observed sardonically.

"You have come far, brother?"

"Far enough," grunted the traveler."

"From the south?"

The man slipped his arm through the strap of his satchel, eased it up on to his shoulder and then picked up his staff. He watched as the heavy iron chain was hooked back on to its staple. "From the east," he said.

The doorkeeper preceded his guest across the flagged courtyard and into a small room which was bare except for a heavy wooden trestle table. Lying upon it was a huge, leather-bound *registrum,* a stone ink pot and a quill pen. The monk frowned, licked his lips, picked up the quill and prodded it gingerly at the ink.

The man smiled faintly. "By your leave, brother," he murmured, and taking the dipped quill, he wrote in rapid, flowing script: *Meister Sternwärts — Seher — ex-Cathay.*

The monk peered down at the ledger, his lips moving silently as he spelt his way laboriously through the entry. By the time he was halfway through the second word, a dark flush had crept up his neck and suffused his whole face. "Mea culpa, Magister," he muttered.

"So you've heard of Meister Sternwärts, have you, brother? And what have you heard, I wonder?"

In a rapid reflex action the simple monk sketched a flickering finger-cross in the air.

The man laughed. "Come, holy fool!" he cried, whacking the doorkeeper across the buttocks with his stick. "Conduct me to Abbé Paulus, lest I conjure you into a salamander!"

In the seven hundred years which had passed since Meister Sternwärts strode up the long white road and requested audience with the Abbé Paulus, the scene from the southern windows of the monastery had changed surprisingly little. Over the seaward slopes of the distant hills, purple-ripe clouds were still lowering their showers of rain like filmy nets, and high above the Ix valley the brown and white eagles spiraled lazily upwards in an invisible funnel of warm air that had risen there like a fountain every sunny day since the hills were first folded millions of years before. Even the road which Sternwärts had trodden, though better surfaced, still followed much the same path, and if a few of the riverside fields had expanded and swallowed up their immediate neighbors, the

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pattern of the stone walls was still recognizably what it had been for centuries. Only the file of high-tension cable carriers striding diagonally down across the valley on a stage of their march from the hydroelectric barrage in the high mountains thirty miles to the north proclaimed that this was the 20th Century.

Gazing down the valley from the library window of Hautaire, Spindrift saw the tiny distant figure trudging up the long slope, saw the sunlight glittering from blond hair as though from a fleck of gold dust, and found himself recalling the teams of men with their white helmets and their clattering machine who had come to erect those giant pylons. He remembered how the brothers had discussed the brash invasion of their privacy and had all agreed that things would never be the same again. Yet the fact remained that within a few short months they had grown accustomed to the novelty, and now Spindrift was no longer sure that he could remember exactly what the valley had looked like before the coming of the pylons. Which was odd, he reflected, because he recalled very clearly the first time he had set eyes upon Hautaire and there had certainly been no pylons then.

May, 1923, it had been. He had bicycled up from the coast with his scanty possessions stuffed into a pair of basketwork panniers slung from his carrier. For the previous six months he had been gathering scraps of material for a projected doctoral thesis on the life and works of the shadowy "Meister Sternwärts" and had written to the abbot of Hautaire on the remote off-chance that some record of a possible visit by the Meister might still survive in the monastery archives. He explained that he had some reason to believe that Sternwärts might have visited Hautaire but that his evidence for this was, admittedly, of the slenderest kind, being based as it was on a single cryptic reference in a letter dated 1274, sent by the meister to a friend in Basel.

Spindrift's enquiry had eventually been answered by a certain Fr. Roderigo, who explained that, since he was custodian of the monastery library, the Abbé Ferrand had accordingly passed M. Spindrift's letter on to him. He was, he continued, profoundly intrigued by M. Spindrift's enquiry because in all the years he had been in charge of the abbey library no one had ever expressed the remotest interest in Meister Sternwärts; in fact, to the best of his knowledge, he, Fr. Roderigo, and the Abbé Ferrand were the only two men now alive who knew that the meister had spent his last years as an honored

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guest of the 13th century abbey and had, in all probability, worked in that very library in which his letter was now being written. He concluded with the warm assurance that any such information concerning the meister as he himself had acquired over the years was at M. Spindrift's disposal.

Spindrift had hardly been able to believe his good fortune. Only the most fantastic chance had led to his turning up that letter in Basel in the first place — the lone survivor of a correspondence which had ended in the incinerators of the Inquisition. Now there seemed to be a real chance that the slender corpus of the meister's surviving works might be expanded beyond the gnomic apothegms of the *Illuminatum!* He had written back by return of post suggesting diffidently that he might perhaps be permitted to visit the monastery in person and give himself the inestimable pleasure of conversing with Fr. Roderigo. An invitation had come winging back, urging him to spend as long as he wished as a lay guest of the order.

If, in those far off days, you had asked Marcus Spindrift what he believed in, the one concept he would certainly never have offered you would have been predestination. He had survived the war to emerge as a Junior Lieutenant in the Supply Corps and, on demobilization, had lost no time in returning to his first love, medieval philosophy. The mindless carnage which he had witnessed from the sidelines had done much to reinforce his interest in the works of the early Christian mystics, with particular reference to the *bons hommes* of the Albigensian heresy. His stumbling across an ancient handwritten transcript of Sternwärt's *Illuminatum* in the shell-shattered ruins of a presbytery in Armentières in April, 1918, had, for Spindrift, all the impact of a genuine spiritual revelation. Some tantalizing quality in the meister's thought had called out to him across the gulf of the centuries, and there and then he had determined that if he were fortunate enough to emerge intact from the holocaust, he would make it his life's work to give form and substance to the shadowy presence which he sensed lurking behind the *Illuminatum* like the smile on the lips of the Gioconda.

Nevertheless, prior to his receiving Fr. Roderigo's letter, Spindrift would have been the first to admit that his quest for some irrefutable evidence that the meister had ever really existed had reaped but one tiny grain of putative "fact" amid untold bushels of frustration. Apparently, not only had no one ever *heard* of Sternwärts, they expressed not the

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slightest interest in whether he had ever existed at all. Indeed, as door after door closed in his face, Spindrift found himself coming to the depressing conclusion that the Weimar Republic had more than a little in common with the Dark Ages.

Yet, paradoxically, as one faint lead after another petered out or dissolved in the misty backwaters of medieval hearsay, Spindrift had found himself becoming more and more convinced not only that Sternwärts *had* existed, but that he himself had, in some mysterious fashion, been selected to prove it. The night before he set out on the last lap of his journey to Hautaire, he had lain awake in his ex-army sleeping bag and had found himself reviewing in his mind the odd chain of coincidences that had brought him to that particular place at that particular time: the initial stumbling upon the *Illuminatum;* the discovery of the cryptic reference coupling Sternwärts with Johannes of Basel; and, most fantastic of all, his happening to alight in Basel upon that one vital letter to Johannes which had been included as a cover-stiffener to a bound-up collection of addresses by the arch-heretic Michael Servetus. At every critical point it was as though he had received the precise nudge which alone could put him back on the trail again. "Old Meister," he murmured aloud, "am I seeking *you,* or are you seeking *me?*" High overhead, a plummeting meteorite scratched a diamond line down the star-frosted window of the sky. Spindrift smiled wryly and settled down to sleep.

At noon precisely the next day, he pedaled wearily round the bend in the lower road and was rewarded with his first glimpse of the distant abbey. With a thankful sigh he dismounted, leaned, panting, over his handlebars and peered up the valley. What he saw was destined to remain just as sharp and clear in his mind's eye until the day he died.

Starkly shadowed by the midday sun, its once red-tiled roofs long since bleached to a pale biscuit and rippling in the heat haze, Hautaire, despite its formidable mass, seemed oddly insubstantial. Behind it, tier upon tier, the mountains rose up faint and blue into the cloudless northern sky. As he gazed up at the abbey, Spindrift conceived the peculiar notion that the structure was simply tethered to the rocks like some strange airship built of stone. It was twisted oddly askew, and some of the buttresses supporting the Romanesque cupola seemed to have been stuck on almost as afterthoughts. He blinked his eyes and the quirk of vision passed. The massive pile re-emerged as solid and unified as any edifice which has successfully stood

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foursquare-on to the elements for over a thousand years. Fumbling a handkerchief from his pocket, Spindrift mopped the sweat from his forehead; then, remounting his bicycle, he pushed off on the last lap of his journey.

Fifteen minutes later, as he wheeled his machine up the final steep incline, a little birdlike monk clad in a faded brown habit fluttered out from the shadows of the portico and scurried with arms outstretched in welcome to the perspiring cyclist. "Welcome, Señor Spindrift!" he cried. "I have been expecting you this half hour past."

Spindrift was still somewhat dizzy from his hot and dusty ride, but he was perfectly well aware that he had not specified any particular day for his arrival, if only because he had no means of knowing how long the journey from Switzerland would take him. He smiled and shook the proffered hand. "Brother Roderigo?"

"Of course, of course," chuckled the little monk, and glancing down at Spindrift's bicycle, he observed, "So they managed to repair your wheel."

Spindrift blinked. "Why, yes," he said. "But how on earth...?"

"Ah, but you must be so hot and tired, Señor! Come into Hautaire where it is cool." Seizing hold of Spindrift's machine, he trundled it briskly across the courtyard, through an archway, down a stone-flagged passage and propped it finally against a cloister wall.

Spindrift, following a pace or two behind, gazed about him curiously. In the past six months he had visited many ecclesiastical establishments but none which had given him the overwhelming sense of timeless serenity that he recognized here. In the center of the cloister yard clear water was bubbling up into a shallow limestone saucer. As it brimmed over, thin wavering streams tinkled musically into the deep basin beneath. Spindrift walked slowly forward into the fierce sunlight and stared down into the rippled reflection of his dusty, sweat-streaked face. A moment later his image was joined by that of the smiling Fr. Roderigo. "That water comes down from a spring in the hillside," the little monk informed him. "It flows through the very same stone pipes which the Romans first laid. It has never been known to run dry."

A metal cup was standing on the shadowed inner rim of the basin. The monk picked it up, dipped it, and handed it to Spindrift. Spindrift smiled his thanks, raised the vessel to his lips and drank. It seemed to him that he had never tasted anything so

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delicious in his life. He drained the cup and handed it back, aware as he did so that his companion was nodding his head as though in affirmation. Spindrift smiled quizzically. "Yes," sighed Fr. Roderigo, "you have come. Just as he said you would."

The sense of acute disorientation which Spindrift had experienced since setting foot in Hautaire persisted throughout the whole of the first week of his stay. For this, Fr. Roderigo was chiefly responsible. In some manner not easy to define, the little monk had succeeded in inducing in his guest the growing conviction that his quest for the elusive Meister Sternwärts had reached its ordained end; that what Spindrift was seeking was hidden here at Hautaire, buried somewhere among the musty manuscripts and incunabula that filled the oak shelves and stone recesses of the abbey library.

True to his promise, the librarian had laid before Spindrift such documentary evidence as he himself had amassed over the years, commencing with that faded entry in the 13th Century *registrum*. Together they had peered down at the ghostly script. "Out of Cathay," mused Spindrift. "Could it have been a joke?"

Fr. Roderigo pulled a face. "Perhaps," he said. "But the hand is indisputably the meister's. Of course, he may simply have wished to mystify the brothers."

"Do you believe that?"

"No," said the monk. "I am sure that what is written there is the truth. Meister Sternwärts had just returned from a pilgrimage in the steps of Apollonius of Tyana. He had lived and studied in the East for ten years." He scuttled across to a distant shelf, lifted down a bound folio volume, blew the dust from it, coughed himself breathless, and then laid the book before Spindrift. "The evidence is all there," he panted with a shy smile. "I bound the sheets together myself some thirty years ago. I remember thinking at the time that it would make a fascinating commentary to Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius.*"

Spindrift opened the book and read the brief and firmly penned Prolegomenon. *"Being then in my forty-ninth year, Sound in Mind and Hale in Body, I, Peter Sternwärts, Seeker after Ancient Truths; Alerted by my Friends; Pursued by mine Enemies; did set forth from Würzburg for Old Buda. What here follows is the Truthful History of all that Befell me and of my Strange Sojourn in Far Cathay, written by my own hand in the Abbey of Hautaire in this year of Our Lord 1273."*

Spindrift looked up from the

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page, and as he did so, he gave a deep sigh of happiness.

Fr. Roderigo nodded. "I know, my friend," he said. "You do not have to tell me. I shall leave you alone with him."

But Spindrift was already turning the first page.

That evening, at Fr. Roderigo's suggestion, Spindrift strolled with him up onto the hillside above Hautaire. The ascent was a slow one because every fifty paces or so Fr. Roderigo was constrained to pause awhile to regain his breath. It was then that Spindrift became aware that the friendly little monk was ill. Beneath that quick and ready smile were etched the deep lines of old familiar pain. He suggested gently that perhaps they might just sit where they were, but Fr. Roderigo would not hear of it. "No, no, my dear Spindrift," he insisted breathlessly. "There is something I must show you. Something that has a profound bearing upon our joint quest."

After some twenty minutes they had reached one of the fallen menhirs that formed a sort of gigantic necklace around the abbey. There Fr. Roderigo paused and patted his heaving chest apologetically. "Tell me, Señor," he panted. "What is your candid opinion of Apollonius of Tyana?"

Spindrift spread his hands in a gesture that contrived to be both noncommittal and expiatory. "To tell the truth I can hardly be said to have an opinion at all," he confessed. "Of course I know that Philostratus made some extraordinary claims on his behalf."

"Apollonius made only one claim for *himself*," said Fr. Roderigo. "But that one was not inconsiderable. He claimed to have foreknowledge of the future."

"Yes?" said Spindrift guardedly.

"The extraordinary accuracy of his predictions led to his falling foul of the Emperor Nero. Apollonius, having already foreseen this, prudently retired to Ephesus before the monster was able to move against him."

Spindrift smiled. "Precognition obviously proved a most useful accomplishment."

"Yes and no," said Fr. Roderigo, ignoring the irony. "Have you reached the passage in the Meister's *Biographia* where he speaks of the Praemonitiones?"

"Do they really exist?"

The little monk seemed on the point of saying something and then appeared to change his mind. "Look," he said, gesturing around him with a sweep of his arm. "You see how Hautaire occupies the exact center of the circle?"

"Why, so it does," observed Spindrift.

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"Not fortuitous, I think."

"No?"

"Nor did he," said Fr. Roderigo with a smile. "The Meister spent a whole year plotting the radiants. Somewhere there is a map which he drew."

"Why should he do that?"

"He was seeking to locate an Apollonian nexus."

"?"

"The concept is meaningless unless one is prepared to accept the possibility of precognition."

"Ah," said Spindrift guardedly. "And did he find what he was looking for?"

"Yes," said Fr. Roderigo simply. "There." He pointed down at the abbey.

"And then what?" enquired Spindrift curiously.

Fr. Roderigo chewed his lower lip and frowned. "He persuaded Abbé Paulus to build him an observatory — an *oculus,* he called it."

"And what did he hope to observe from it?"

"*In* it," corrected Fr. Roderigo with a faint smile. "It had no windows."

"You amaze me," said Spindrift, shaking his head. "Does it still exist?"

"It does."

"I should very much like to see it. Would that be possible?"

"It might," the monk admitted. "We would have to obtain the abbot's permission. However, I —" He broke off, racked by a savage fit of coughing that turned his face grey. Spindrift, much alarmed, patted his companion gently on the back and felt utterly helpless. Eventually the little monk recovered his breath and with a trembling hand wiped a trace of spittle from his blue lips. Spindrift was horrified to see a trace of blood on the white handkerchief. "Hadn't we better be making our way back?" he suggested solicitously.

Fr. Roderigo nodded submissively and allowed Spindrift to take him by the arm and help him down the track. When they were about halfway down, he was overcome by another fit of coughing which left him pale and gasping. Spindrift, now thoroughly alarmed, was all for going to fetch help from the abbey, but the monk would not hear of it. When he had recovered sufficiently to continue, he whispered hoarsely, "I promise I will speak to the abbot about the *oculus.*"

Spindrift protested that there was no hurry, but Fr. Roderigo shook his head stubbornly. "Fortunately there *is* still just time, my friend. Just time enough."

Three days later Fr. Roderigo was dead. After attending the evening Requiem Mass for his friend, Spindrift made his way up

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to the library and sat there alone for a long time. The day was fast fading and the mistral was beginning to blow along the Ix valley. Spindrift could hear it sighing round the buttresses and mourning among the crannies in the crumbling stonework. He thought of Roderigo now lying out on the hillside in his shallow anonymous grave. *The goal ye seek lies within yourself.* He wondered what had inspired the abbot to choose that particular line from the *Illuminatum* for his Requiem text and suspected that he was the only person present who had recognized its origin.

There was a deferential knock at the library door, and a young novice came in carrying a small, metal-bound casket. He set it down on the table before Spindrift, took a key from his pocket and laid it beside the box. "The father superior instructed me to bring these to you, sir," he said. "They were in Brother Roderigo's cell." He bowed his head slightly, turned, and went out, closing the door softly behind him.

Spindrift picked up the key and examined it curiously. It was quite unlike any other he had ever seen, wrought somewhat in the shape of a florid, double-ended question mark. He had no idea how old it was or even what it was made of. It looked like some alloy — pewter, maybe? — but there was no discernible patina of age. He laid it down again and drew the casket towards him. This was about a foot long, nine inches or so wide, and perhaps six inches deep. The oak lid, which was ornately decorated with silver inlay and brass studding, was slightly domed. Spindrift raised the box and shook it gently. He could hear something shifting around inside, bumping softly against the sides. He did not doubt that the strange key unlocked the casket, but when he came to try, he could find no keyhole in which to fit it. He peered underneath. By the trickle of waning light through the western windows he could just discern an incised pentagram and the Roman numerals for 1274.

His pulse quickening perceptibly, he hurried across to the far end of the room and fetched an iron candlestick. Having lit the candle, he set it down beside the box and adjusted it so that its light was shining directly upon the lid. It was then that he noticed that part of the inlaid decoration appeared to correspond to what he had previously assumed to be the handle of the key. He pressed down on the silver inlay with his fingertips and thought he felt it yield ever so slightly.

He retrieved the key, adjusted it so that its pattern completely

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covered that of the inlay, and then pressed downwards experimentally. There was a faint *click!* and he felt the lid pushing itself upwards against the pressure of his fingers. He let out his pent breath in a faint sigh, detached the key, and eased the lid back on its hinge. Lying within the box was a vellum-covered book and a quill pen.

Spindrift wiped his fingers along his sleeve and, with his heart racing, dipped his hand into the casket and lifted out the book. As the light from the candle slanted across the cover, he was able to make out the faded sepia lettering spelling out the word: *PRAEMONITIONES* and below it, in a darker ink, the cynical query — *Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?*

Spindrift blinked up into the candlelight. "Who will watch the watchers?" he murmured. "Who, indeed?"

The wind snuffled and whimpered against the now dark window panes, and the vesper bell began to toll in the abbey tower. Spindrift gave a violent, involuntary shiver and turned back the cover of the book.

Someone, perhaps even Peter Sternwärts himself, had stitched onto the fly leaf a sheet of folded parchment. Spindrift carefully unfolded it and peered down upon what, at first glance, seemed to be an incomprehensible spiderweb of finely drawn lines. He had been staring at it for fully a minute before it dawned on him that the dominant pattern was remarkably similar to that on the lid of the casket and its weirdly shaped key. But there was something else too, something that teased at his recollection, something he knew he had once seen somewhere else. And suddenly he had it: an interlinked, megalithic spiral pattern carved into a rockface near Tintagael in Cornwall; here were exactly those same whorled and coupled S shapes that had once seemed to his youthful imagination like a giant's thumbprints in the granite.

No sooner was the memory isolated than he had associated this graphic labyrinth with the pagan menhirs dotting the hillside round Hautaire. Could *this* be the map Roderigo had mentioned? He held the parchment closer to the quaking candleflame and at once perceived the ring of tiny circles which formed a periphery around the central vortex. From each of these circles faint lines had been scratched across the swirling whirlpool to meet at its center.

Spindrift was now convinced that what he was holding in his hands was some arcane chart of Hautaire itself and its immediate environs, but at the precise point where the abbey itself should have been indicated, something had

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been written in minute letters. Unfortunately the point happened to coincide with the central cruciform fold in the parchment. Spindrift screwed up his eyes and thought he could just make out the words *tempus* and *pons* — or, possibly *fons* — together with a word which might equally well have been *cave* or *carpe*. "Time," "bridge," or perhaps "source." And what else? "Beware"? "Seize"? He shook his head in frustration and gave it up as a bad job. Having carefully refolded the chart, he turned over the flyleaf and began to read.

By the time he had reached the last page, the candle had sunk to a guttering stub, and Spindrift was acutely conscious of an agonizing headache. He lowered his face into his cupped hands and waited for the throbbing behind his eyeballs to subside. He had, to the best of his knowledge, been intoxicated only once in his life, and that was on the occasion of his twenty-first birthday. He had not enjoyed the experience. The recollection of how the world had seemed to rock on its foundations had remained one of his most distressing memories. Now he was reminded of it all over again as his mind lurched drunkenly from one frail clutching point to the next. Of course it was a hoax, an extraordinarily elaborate, purposeless hoax. It *had* to be! And yet he feared it was nothing of the sort, that what he had just read was, in truth, nothing less than a medieval prophetic text of such incredible accuracy that it made absolute nonsense of every rationalist philosophy ever conceived by man. Having once read the *Praemonitiones*, one stepped like Alice through the looking glass into a world where only the impossible was possible. But *how?* In God's name *how?*

Spindrift removed his hands from before his eyes, opened the book at random, and by the vestige of light left in the flapping candle flame, read once more how, in the year 1492, Christobal Colon, a Genoese navigator, would bow to the dictates of the sage Chang Heng and would set sail into the west on the day of the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain. He would return the following year, laden with treasure and "companioned by those whom he would call Indians but who would in truth be no such people." At which point the candle flared up briefly and went out.

Next morning, Spindrift requested, and was granted, an audience with the abbot. He took with him the wooden casket and the mysterious key. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, and the dark rings beneath them testified to a sleepless night.

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Abbé Ferrand was in his early fifties — a stalwart man with shrewd eyes, ash-grey hair and bushy eyebrows. His upright stance struck Spindrift as having more than a touch of the military about it. He wore the simple brown habit of his order, and only the plain brass crucifix, slung on a beaded leather thong about his neck, distinguished him from the other monks. He smiled as Spindrift entered the study, then rose from behind his desk and held out his hand. Spindrift, momentarily confused, tucked the casket under his left arm and then shook the proffered hand.

"And how can I be of service to you, M'sieur Spindrift?"

Spindrift took a breath, gripped the casket in both hands and held it out in front of him. "Abbé Ferrand, I...," he began, and then dried up.

The corners of the abbot's lips were haunted by the ghost of a smile. "Yes?" he prompted gently.

"Sir," blurted Spindrift, "do you know what's in here?"

"Yes," said the abbot. "I think I do."

"Then why did you send it to me?"

"Brother Roderigo wished me to. It was one of his last requests."

"The book's a forgery, of course. But you must know that."

"You think so, M'sieur?"

"Well, of course I do."

"And what makes you so certain?"

"Why," cried Spindrift, "because it *has* to be!"

"But there have always been prophets, M'sieur Spindrift," returned the abbot mildly. "And they have all prophesied."

Spindrift waved a dismissive hand. "Nostradamus, you mean? Vague ambiguities. Predictions of disaster which could be interpreted to fit any untoward circumstance. But this...."

The abbot nodded. "Forgive my asking, M'sieur," he said, "but what was it exactly that brought you to Hautaire?"

Spindrift set the casket down on the desk in front of him and laid the key beside it. As he did so he realized, not for the first time, that the question Abbé Ferrand was posing could have no simple answer. "Principally, I believe, Peter Sternwärts' *Illuminatum,*" he said. "I felt a compulsion to learn all I could about their author."

The abbot appeared to ponder on this reply; then he turned on his sandaled heel, walked over to a wall cupboard, opened it, and drew from within another vellum-covered notebook similar in appearance to that which Spindrift had replaced in the casket. Having closed the cupboard door, the abbot stood for a moment tapping the notebook against his finger ends. Finally he

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turned back to Spindrift. "I take it you have studied the *Praemonitiones*, M'sieur Spindrift?"

Spindrift nodded.

"Then you will perhaps recall that its forecasts end with the Franco-Prussion war. Unless my memory deceives me, the final entry concerns Bazaine's surrender at Metz in October, 1870; the capitulation of Paris in 1871; and the signing of the treaty at Frankfurt-sur-Main on May 10th of that same year?"

"Yes," said Spindrift, "that is perfectly correct."

The abbot opened the book he was holding, flipped over a few pages, glanced at what was written there, and then said, "Would you say, M'sieur Spindrift, that Europe has at last seen the end of war?"

"Why, certainly," said Spindrift. "The League of Nations has outlawed —"

"On September 1st, 1939," cut in the abbot, "Russia and Germany will, in concert, invade Poland. As a direct consequence of this Britain and France will declare war on Germany."

"But that's preposterous!" exclaimed Spindrift. "Why, the Versailles Treaty specifically states that under no circumstances is Germany ever again to be allowed to rearm!"

The abbot turned back a page. "In 1924 — next year, is it not? — Lenin will die and will be succeeded by" — (here he tilted the page to catch the light — "Joseph Viss-arionovitch — I think that's right — Stalin. An age of unparalleled tyranny will commence in the so-called Soviet Republic, which will continue for fifty-one years." He flicked on. "In 1941 German armies will invade Russia and inflict massive defeats on the Soviet forces." He turned another page. "In July, 1945, the fabric of civilization will be rent asunder by an explosion in an American desert." He shrugged and closed up the book, almost with relief.

"You are surely not asking me to believe that those fantastic predictions are the work of Peter Sternwärts?" Spindrift protested.

"Only indirectly," said the abbot. "Without Meister Sternwärts they would certainly never have come into existence. Nevertheless, he did not write them himself."

"Then who did?"

"These last? Brother Roderigo."

Spindrift just gaped.

The abbot laid the book down on the desk beside the casket and picked up the key. "Before he died," he said, "Brother Roderigo informed me that you had expressed a desire to examine the *oculus*. Is this so?"

"Then it really does exist?"

"Oh, yes. Most certainly it

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exists. This is the key to it."

"In that case, I would very much like to see it."

"Very well, M'sieur," said the abbot, "I will conduct you there myself. But, first, I should be intrigued to know what makes you so certain that the *Praemonitiones* is a forgery?"

Spindrift looked down at the casket. The whorled inlay on its lid seemed to spin like a silver Catherine wheel. He dragged his gaze away with difficulty. "Because I have always believed in free-will," he said flatly. "To believe in the *Praemonitiones* would be to deny it."

"Oh," said the abbot, "is that all? I thought perhaps you had detected the alteration in the script which takes place at roughly fifty-year intervals. It is admittedly slight, but it cannot be denied."

"The light was not good in the library last night," said Spindrift. "I noticed no marked change in the cursive style of the entries."

The abbot smiled. "Look again, M'sieur Spindrift," he said. "By daylight." He pressed the key into the lock, removed the *Praemonitiones* from the casket and handed it over.

Spindrift leafed through the pages, then paused, turned back a few, nodded, and went on. "Why, yes," he said. "Here in this entry for 1527: 'The Holy City sacked by the armies of the Emperor Charles.' There *is* a difference. How do you account for it?"

"They were written by different hands," said the abbot. "Though all, I hazard, with that same pen."

Spindrift reached into the casket, took out the cut-down quill and examined it. As his fingers closed round the yellowed shaft, it seemed to twist ever so slightly between them as though endowed with some strange will of its own. He dropped it back hastily into the box and flushed with annoyance at his own childishness. "If I understand you, Abbé, you are saying that these predictions were made by many different hands over the past seven centuries."

"That is correct. It would appear that the horizon of foresight is generally limited to about fifty years, though in certain cases — notably Sternwärts himself — it reaches a good deal further." The abbot said this in a quiet matter-of-fact tone that Spindrift found distinctly disconcerting. He reached out tentatively for the second book which the abbot had placed on the desk, but seemingly unaware of Spindrift's intention, the abbot had casually laid his own hand upon it. "Now, if you are ready, M'sieur," he said, "I suggest we might climb up and pay our respects to the *oculus*."

Spindrift nodded.

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The abbot smiled and seemed pleased. He placed the two books within the casket and clapped the lid shut. Then he picked up the key, took down another bunch of keys which was hanging from a hook on the wall, and, nodding to Spindrift to follow him, led the way along a cool white corridor, up a flight of stone stairs and along a passage buttressed by slanting sunbeams. They took several turns and climbed yet another flight of stairs. Spindrift glanced out of a window as they passed and observed that they were now almost on a level with the ruin of the prehistoric stone circle. The abbot's leather sandals slapped briskly against the soles of his bare feet and made a noise like a razor being stropped.

At last they reached a small oak door. The abbot paused, selected one of the keys from the bunch, thrust it into the lock and twisted it. The hinges groaned and the door squealed inwards. "This leads to the dome of the rotunda," he explained. "The *oculus* is actually situated within the fabric of the northern wall. It is certainly an architectural curiosity."

Spindrift ducked his head, passed through the doorway, and found himself in a narrow crack of a curved passageway dimly lit by narrow barred slits in the outer stonework. Thick dust lay on the stone floor, which was caked with a crust formed from generations of bird and bat droppings. The floor spiraled upwards at an angle of some ten degrees, and Spindrift calculated that they had made at least one complete circuit of the rotunda before the abbot said, *"Ecce oculus!"*

Peering past the broad shoulder of his guide, Spindrift saw a second door, so narrow that a man could have passed through it only with extreme difficulty. The abbot squeezed himself backwards into a niche and allowed Spindrift to edge around him. Then he handed over the key to the casket, saying as he did so: "You will find that it operates in the normal way, M'sieur."

"Thank you," said Spindrift, taking the key from him and approaching the door. "Is there room for only one person inside?"

"Barely that," said the abbot. "The door opens outwards."

Spindrift inserted the key into the lock and twisted it. The wards grated reluctantly but still allowed the key to turn. Then, using it as a handle, for there was, indeed, no other, he pulled the door gently towards him. A moment later he had started back with a barely suppressed gasp of astonishment. The door had opened to disclose a sort of lidless limestone coffin, bare and empty, standing on its end, apparently cemented fast into the

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surrounding masonry. "What on earth is it?" he demanded.

The abbot chuckled. "That is your *oculus*, M'sieur."

Spindrift eyed the coffin uncertainly. "And you say Sternwärts built that?" he enquired dubiously.

"Well, certainly he must have caused it to be built," said the abbot. "Of that there can be little doubt. See there —" He pointed to some lettering carved on the limestone corbel which framed the "head" of the casque — *Sternwärts hoc fecit.* "Not proof positive, I grant you, but good enough for me." He smiled again. "Well, now you are here, M'sieur Spindrift, are you not tempted to try it?"

Spindrift gazed at the Latin lettering. "Sternwärts made this," he muttered, and, even as he spoke the words aloud, he knew he would have to step inside that stone shell, if only because to refuse to do so would be to deny the noble and courageous spirit of the man who had penned the *Illuminatum.* Yet he could not disguise his reluctance. How dearly at that moment he would have liked to say: "Tomorrow, perhaps, or next week, if it's all the same to you, Abbé." But he knew he would be allowed no second chance. It was now or never. He nodded, drew a deep breath, swallowed once, stepped resolutely forward and edged himself backwards into the cold sarcophagus.

Gently the abbot closed the door upon him and sketched over it a slow and thoughtful sign of the Cross.

For no particular reason that he was aware of, Spindrift had recently found himself thinking about Fr. Roderigo. Once or twice he had even wandered out into the abbey graveyard and tried to locate the spot where the bones of the little monk were buried. He had pottered about, peering vaguely among the hummocks, but he found that he could no longer recall precisely where the body of his friend had been interred. Only the abbots of Hautaire were accorded headstones, and even Abbé Ferrand's was by now thickly encrusted with lichen.

Spindrift found a piece of dry twig and began scratching at the lettered limestone, but by the time he had scraped clean the figures 1910 - 1937, he found the impulse had already waned. After all, what was the point? That was the surprising thing about growing old: nothing seemed quite so urgent or important any more. Sharp edges became blunt; black and white fudged off into grey; and your attention kept wandering off after stupid little tidbits of memory and getting lost among the flowery hedgerows of the Past. *Quis Custodiet...?*

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The old librarian straightened up, released the piece of twig he was holding and began massaging his aching back. As he did so, he suddenly recalled the letter. He had been carrying it around with him all day and had, in fact, come out into the graveyard on purpose to try to make up his mind about it. Obscurely he felt he needed the ghostly presence of Roderigo and the Abbé Ferrand to help him. Above all he needed to be *sure.*

He peered around for a convenient seat, then lowered himself creakily so that his back rested against the abbe's sun-warmed headstone. He dipped around inside his woolen habit for his spectacles and the envelope, and having at last settled everything to his comfort and satisfaction, he extracted the letter, unfolded it, cleared his throat and read out aloud:

Post Restante
Arles
Bouches du Rhône.

June 21, 1981.

Dear Sir,

I have recently returned to Europe after four years' travel and study in India, Burma and Nepal, during which one of my teachers introduced me to your marvelous edition of the *Biographia Mystica* of Meister Sternwärts. It was a complete revelation to me and, together with the *Illuminatum,* has radically changed my whole outlook on life. *"The truly aimed shaft strikes him who looses it"* (Ill.XXIV)!!

I could not permit myself to quit Europe and return home to Chicago without having made an effort to thank you in person and, perhaps, to give myself the treat of conversing with you about the life and works of the Meister.

If you could possibly see your way towards gratifying my wish sometime — say within the next month or so? — would you be so good as to drop me a line at the above address, and I will come with all speed to Hautaire.

Yours most sincerely,
J.S. Harland

Spindrift concluded his reading, raised his head and blinked out over the valley. *"Quis Custodiet?"* he murmured, remembering suddenly, with quite astonishing clarity, how once, long ago, Brother Roderigo had handed him a cup of ice-cool water and had then nodded his head in affirmation. How had *he* known?

Hurtling out of the northern sky, three black planes, shaped like assegais, rushed down the length of the valley, drowning it with their reverberating thunder. Spindrift sighed, refolded the letter and fumbled it back into its envelope. He reached out, plucked a leaf of

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wild sage, rubbed it between finger and thumb and held it under his nose. By then the planes were already fifty miles away, skimming low over the distant, glittering sea, but the ripples of their bullying passage still lapped faintly back and forth between the ancient hills.

"Very well," murmured Spindrift, "I will write to this young man. *Ex nihilo, nihil fit.* But perhaps Mr. Harland is not 'nothing.' Perhaps he is something — even, maybe, my own successor, as I was Roderigo's and Roderigo was Brother Martin's. There always has *been* a successor — a watcher — an eye for the eye." He grunted, heaved himself up from the grave on which he was sitting and shuffled off towards the abbey, a slightly dotty old lay brother, muttering to himself as he went.

The counter clerk at the Bureau des Postes sniffed down her nose, glared at the passport which was held out to her and then, reluctantly, handed over the letter, expressing her profound disapproval of the younger generation.

The slim, deeply tanned, blonde girl in the faded blue shirt and jeans examined the postmark on the letter and chuckled delightedly. She hurried out into the sunny square, sat herself down on a low wall, carefully tore off a narrow strip from the end of the envelope and extracted Spindrift's letter. Her sea-blue eyes flickered rapidly along the lines of typescript. "Oh, *great!*" she exclaimed. "Gee, isn't that *mar*-velous?"

Judy Harland, who, in her twenty-second year, still contrived to look a youthful and boyish eighteen, had once written on some application form in the space reserved for "occupation" the single word "enthusiast." They had not offered her the job, but it can hardly have been on the grounds of self-misrepresentation. Her letter to Spindrift had been dashed off on the spur of the moment when she had discovered that the Abbey of Hautaire was an easy day's hitchhike down the coast from Arles. Not that the information which she had given Spindrift was untrue — it *was* true — up to a point, that point being that her interest in Meister Sternwärts was but one of several such enthusiasms among which, over the past eight years, she had zoomed back and forth like a tipsy hummingbird in a frangipani forest. She had already sampled Hatha Yoga, the teachings of Don Carlos, Tarot, Zen Buddhism, and the *I Ching*. Each had possessed her like an ardent lover to the exclusion of all the others — until the next. The *Illuminatum* and the *Biographia Mystica* represented but the most

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recent of her spiritual love affairs.

Her signing of her letter with her initials rather than her Christian name had been an act of prudence induced by certain awkward experiences in Persia and Afghanistan. She had survived these unscathed, just as she had survived everything else, because her essential self was hedged about by an inviolable conviction that she had been chosen to fulfil some stupendous but as-yet-unspecified purpose. The fact that she had no very clear idea of what the purpose might be was immaterial. What counted was the strength of the conviction. Indeed, in certain respects, Judy had more than a little in common with Joan of Arc.

A little deft work on her hair with a pair of scissors and a concealed chiffon scarf wound round her chest soon transformed her outwardly into a very passable boy. It was as James Harland that she climbed down from the cab of the friendly *camion* driver, shouldered her well-worn rucksack and strode off, whistling like a bird, up the winding, dusty road towards Hautaire. Just as Spindrift himself had done some sixty years before, and at precisely the same spot, she paused as she came within sight of the abbey and stood still for a moment, staring up at it. She saw a brown and white eagle corkscrewing majestically upwards in an invisible funnel of warm air, and as she watched it, she experienced an almost overwhelming impulse to turn round and go back. Perhaps if she had been under the aegis of the *I Ching*, she would have obeyed it, but Hautaire was now to her what fabled Cathay had once been to Peter Sternwärts — a challenge to be met and overcome. Shrugging aside her forebodings, she hooked her thumbs more firmly under the straps of her pack and marched on up the road.

Old age had lengthened Spindrift's vision. From the library window he had picked out the determined little figure when it was still three-quarters of a mile away. Something about it touched his heart like a cold finger. *"Golden-haired like an angel."* Had he not himself written that long, long ago, after his last visit to the rotunda? How many years was it now? Fifty at least. As far as the eye could see. Why then had he not gone back? Was it fear? Or lack of any real religious faith to sustain him? Yet everything he had "seen" had come to pass just as he had described it. Such crazy things they had seemed too. Sunburst bombs shattering whole cities in the blink of an eye; men in silver suits walking on the face of the moon; an assassin's bullets striking down the President who would put them there; the endless wars; the horror

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and anguish of the extermination camps; human bestiality. Pain, pain, always pain. Until he had been able to endure no more. His last entry in the *Praemonitiones* must surely be almost due now. Did that mean he had failed in his bounden duty? Well, then, so he had failed, but at least he had given the world the *Biographia*, and none of his predecessors had done that. And there was still the marvel of the *Exploratio Spiritualis* to come — that masterpiece which he alone had unearthed, translated, and pieced together. Perhaps one day it would be published. But not by him. Let someone else shoulder that burden. He knew what it would entail. And surely he had done enough. But the chill lay there in his heart like a splinter of ice that would not melt. *"Golden-haired like an angel."* Muttering to himself, he turned away from the window, shuffled across the library and began making his way down to the abbey gate to greet his visitor.

As a child Judy had sometimes toyed with a fanciful notion that people grew to resemble the names they had been born with. She was reminded of it when she first set eyes on Spindrift. His hair was as white and soft as the wisps of foam on a weir pool, and he blinked at her waterily through his steel-rimmed glasses as he shook her by the hand. "You are very young, Mr. Harland," he observed. "But, then, to you I daresay I must seem very old."

"Are you?" she asked in that blunt way of hers which some people found charming and others simply ill-mannered.

"I am exactly as old as this century," he replied with a smile. "Which makes me four score and one. A goodly stretch by any reckoning, wouldn't you say?"

"And you've lived here all your life?"

"Most of it, to be sure. I first came to Hautaire in 1923."

"Hey! My *father* was born in 1923!"

"An *annus mirabilis*, indeed," the old man chuckled. "Come along, Mr. Harland. Let me be the first to introduce you to Hautaire."

So saying, he led her through the outer courtyard and down into the cloisters where, like dim autumnal leaves, a few of the brothers were wandering in silent meditation. Judy's bright magpie glance darted this way and that. "Say," she whispered, "this sure is some place."

"Would you care for a drink?" asked Spindrift, suddenly recalling his own introduction to the abbey and hoping, vaguely, that by repeating the pattern he would be vouchsafed a sign of some kind.

"I surely would," said Judy.

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"Thanks a lot." She shrugged off her rucksack and dumped it down beside the basin of the fountain while Spindrift groped around short-sightedly for the cup.

"Here, let me," she said and, scooping up the cup, she dipped it into the basin and took a hearty swig.

Spindrift adjusted his spectacles and peered at her. A solitary drop of water hung for a moment like a tear from her square firm chin, and then she had brushed it away with the back of her hand. "That was great," she informed him. "Real cool."

Spindrift nodded and smiled. "That fountain was here even before the abbey was built," he said.

"Is that so? Then Meister Sternwärts may have done just what I've done."

"Yes," agreed Spindrift. "It is more than likely."

"That's really something," sighed Judy. "Hey, I've brought my copy of the *Biographia* for you to autograph. It's right here in my pack. I carry it around every place I go."

"Oh, really?" said Spindrift, flushing with pleasure. "I must say I regard that as a great compliment."

"The *Biographia's* one of the world's great books," averred Judy stoutly. "Possibly the greatest."

Spindrift felt appropriately flattered. "Perhaps you would be interested to see the original manuscript?" he suggested diffidently.

"*Would* I! You mean you have it right here in the abbey?"

"It's in the library."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" demanded Judy. "I mean — that is — if it's convenient."

"Oh, yes, yes," Spindrift assured her. "We'll just call in at the guest wing first, and I'll show you your quarters. We can go straight on up from there."

Judy's unfeigned enthusiasm for the meister was all the old man could have wished for. He laid out the original manuscript of the *Biographia Mystica* before her and guided her through it while she gave little gasps and exclamations of wonder and pleasure. "It's just as if you'd known him personally, Mr. Spindrift," she said at last. "You make him come alive."

"Oh, he *is*, Mr. Harland. It is a gross error on our part to assume that life is mere physical existence. The *élan vital* lives on in the sublime creations of human genuis. One only needs to study the *Exploratio Spiritualis* to realize that."

"And what's the *Exploratio Spiritualis*, Mr. Spindrift?"

"One day, I hope, it will be recognized as the *Biographia*

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*Mystica* of the human mind."

"You don't say!"

"But I *do*, Mr. Harland. And, what is more, I have the best of reasons for saying so."

Judy looked up at him curiously. "You don't mean that you've dug up *another* work by Meister Sternwärts?"

Spindrift nodded emphatically.

"Why that's marvelous!" she cried. "Sensational! Can I see it?"

"It would mean very little to you, I'm afraid, Mr. Harland. The *Spiritualis* was written in cipher."

"And you've cracked it? Translated it?"

"I have."

"Wow!" breathed Judy.

"I have spent the last twenty-five years working at it," said Spindrift, with more than a trace of pride in his voice. "It is, I might pardonably claim, my swan song."

"And when's it going to be published?"

"By me — never."

"But why on earth not?"

"The responsibility is too great."

"How do you mean?"

Spindrift lifted his head, and gazed out of the open library window towards the distant invisible sea. "The world is not yet ready for the *Spiritualis*," he murmured. "Peter realized that, which is why he chose to write it in the form he did."

Judy frowned. "I'm afraid I'm still not with you, Mr. Spindrift. Why isn't it ready?"

"To accept a determinist universe as a proven fact?"

"Who says we're not?"

Almost reluctantly Spindrift withdrew his gaze from the far horizon and blinked down at her. "You mean you *can* accept it, Mr. Harland? he asked curiously.

"Well, I certainly accept the *I Ching*."

"But you must, surely, believe in free will?"

"Well, up to a point, sure I do. I mean to say *I* have to consult the *I Ching*. It doesn't decide *for* me that I'm going to consult it, does it?"

It seemed to Spindrift at that moment that he had reached the final crossroads. But he was still not sure which path was the right one. He stirred the air vaguely with his fingers. "Then tell me, Mr. Harland," he said, "for the sake of the supposition, if you wish — what do you suppose would follow if one succeeded in convincing the human race that everything in life *was* preordained?"

Judy smiled. "But most of them believe it anyway. Astrology, Tarot, *I Ching* — you name it; we'll believe it. The fault, Mr. Spindrift, lies not in our selves but in our stars."

"Really?" said Spindrift. "I must say that you astonish me."

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"Well, a lot's happened in the last thirty years. We're the post-H-bomb generation, remember. We got to see where reason had led us. Right bang up to the edge of the precipice."

Spindrift nodded. "Yes, yes," he murmured. "I know. I saw it."

"Come again?"

"The *Pikadon.* That's what they called it." He closed his eyes and shuddered. A moment later he had gripped her by the arm. "But imagine *knowing* what was going to happen and that you were powerless to prevent it. What then, Mr. Harland?"

"How do you mean 'knowing'?"

"Just that," Spindrift insisted. "Seeing it all happening *before* it *had* happened. What then?"

"Are you serious?"

"It's all there in the *Spiritualis,*" said Spindrift, releasing his hold on her arm and gripping the back of her chair with both hands. "Peter Sternwärts rediscovered what Apollonius of Tyana had brought back with him from the East. But he did more than that. He devised the means whereby this knowledge could be handed down to future generations. He was a seer who bequeathed his eyes to posterity."

Judy's eyes narrowed. "Just let me get this straight," she said slowly. "Are you telling me that Meister Sternwärts could actually *see* the future?"

"Yes," said Spindrift simply.

"What? *All* of it?"

"No. Only the biggest storms on the horizon — the crises for civilization. He called them 'Knots in Time'."

"But how do you know that?"

"He wrote them down," said Spindrift. "In a book he called *Praemonitiones.*"

"Holy Moses!" Judy whispered. "You just *have* to be kidding!"

"Sternwärts' own forecasts extend only as far as the 15th Century, but, as I said before, he bequeathed his eyes to posterity."

"And just what does that *mean,* Mr. Spindrift?"

Spindrift drew in his breath. "Wait here a moment, Mr. Harland," he said, "and I will do my best to show you what it means."

A minute later he was back carrying the first volume of the *Praemonitiones.* He opened it at the frontispiece map and spread it out before her. Then he settled his spectacles firmly on his nose and began to explain what was what.

"This was drawn by Peter Sternwärts himself," he said. "There can be no question of that. It represents a bird's-eye view of the area within which Hautaire is situated. These dots represent the Neolithic stone circle, and the straight lines radiating from the menhirs all cross at this point here. I thought at first that these spirals

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were some primitive attempt to represent lines of magnetic force, but I know now that this is not so. Nevertheless, they do represent a force field of some kind — one, moreover, which was undoubtedly first detected by the ancient race who raised the original stone circle. Sternwarts realized that the menhirs acted as some sort of focusing device and that the area of maximum intensity would probably occur at the point where the intersection of the chords was held in equilibrium by the force field — what he called the *mare temporis* — sea of time."

Judy nodded. "So?" she said.

"He deduced that at this particular point he would find what he was seeking. I have since unearthed among the archives a number of sketches he made of similar stone circles in Brittany. And just off the center of each he has written the same word *oculus* — that is the Latin word for 'eye.'"

"Hey," said Judy, "you don't mean..."

"Indeed I do," insisted Spindrift. "After an immense amount of trial and error he succeeded in locating the precise point — and it is a very small area indeed — right here in Hautaire itself. Having found it, he built himself a time observatory and then proceeded to set down on record everything he saw. The results are there before you. The *Praemonitiones!*"

Judy stared down at the map. "But if that's so, why hasn't anyone else discovered one? I mean there's Stonehenge and Carnac and so forth, isn't there?"

Spindrift nodded. "That mystified Peter too, until he realized that the focal point of each circle was almost invariably situated a good twenty or so meters above ground level. He postulates that in the days when the circles were first raised, wooden towers were erected in their centers. The seer, who would probably have been a high priest, would have had sole access to that tower. In the case of Hautaire, it just so happened that the site of the long-vanished tower was occupied by the rotunda of the Abbey."

"And that was why Sternwärts came here?"

"No, Peter came to Hautaire because he had reason to believe that Apollonius of Tyana had made a special point of visiting this particular circle. There was apparently still a pagan shrine and a resident oracle here in the First Century A.D."

Judy turned over some pages in the book before her, but she barely glanced at what was written there. "But how does it *work?*" she asked. "What do you do in this *oculus?* Peek into a crystal ball or something?"

"One sees," said Spindrift

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vaguely. "Within the mind's eye."

"But *how?*"

"That I have never discovered. Nor, I hazard, did Peter. Nevertheless that is what happens."

"And can you choose what you want to see?"

"I used to think not," said Spindrift, "but since I stumbled upon the key to the *Exploratio Spiritualis,* I have been forced to revise my opinion. I now believe that Peter Sternwärts was deliberately working towards the goal of a spiritual and mental discipline which would allow him to exert a direct influence upon what he saw. His aim was to become a shaper of the future as well as a seer."

Judy's blue eyes widened perceptibly. "A *shaper?*" she echoed. "And did he?"

"It is impossible to tell," said Spindrift. "But it is surely not without significance that he left Hautaire before he died."

"Come again?"

"Well, by the time he left he knew for certain that chance does nothing that has not been prepared well in advance. He must have realized that the only way in which he could exert an influence upon the future would be by acting in the present. If he could succeed in tracing the thread backwards from its knot, he might be able to step in and adjust things at the very point where only the merest modicum of intervention could affect the future. Of course, you must understand that this is all the purest supposition on my part."

Judy nodded. "And these disciplines — mental what's-its — what were they?"

"They are expressly designed to enable the seer to select his own particular vision. Having seen the catastrophe ahead, he could, if he were successful, feel his way backwards in time from that point and, hopefully, reach a *junctura criticalis* — the precise germinal instant of which some far-off tragedy was the progeny."

"Yes, I understand that. But what *sort* of disciplines were they?"

"Ironically, Mr. Harland, they appear to have had a good deal in common with those which are still practiced today among certain Eastern faiths."

"What's ironical about that?"

"Well, surely, the avowed aim of the Oriental sages is to achieve the ultimate annihilation of the self — of the ego. What Peter Sternwärts was hoping to achieve seems to me to have been the exact opposite — the veritable apotheosis of the human ego! Nothing less than the elevation of Man to God! He had a persistent vision of himself as the potter and the whole of humanity as his clay. That explains why, throughout the *Exploratio,* he constantly refers to

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himself as a 'shaper.' It also explains why I have shunned the responsibility of publishing it."

"Then why are you telling me?" demanded Judy shrewdly.

Spindrift removed his spectacles, closed his eyes, and massaged his eyelids with his fingertips. "I am very old, Mr. Harland," he said at last. "It is now over fifty years since I last visited the *oculus,* and the world is very close to the horizon of my own visions. Ever since Abbé Ferrand's untimely death forty years ago, the secret of the *oculus* has been mine alone. If I were to die this minute, it would perish with me, and I, by default, would have betrayed the trust which I believe has been reposed in me. In other words, I would die betraying the very man who has meant far more to me than any I have ever known in the flesh — Peter Sternwärts himself."

"But why choose *me?*" Judy insisted. "Why not one of the other brothers?"

Spindrift sighed. "I think, Mr. Harland, that it is perhaps because I recognize in you some of my own lifelong reverence for Peter Sternwärts. Furthermore, in some manner which I find quite impossible to explain, I am convinced that you are associated with the last visit I paid to the *oculus* — with my final vision."

"Really? And what was that?"

Spindrift looked down at the parchment which had absorbed so much of his life, and then he shook his head. "There was a girl," he murmured. "A girl with golden hair...."

"A *girl?*"

Like a waterlogged corpse rising slowly to the surface, the old man seemed to float up from the troubled depths of some dark and private nightmare. His eyes cleared. "Why, yes," he said. "A *girl.* Do you know, Mr. Harland, in all these years that point had never struck me before! A girl, *here in Hautaire!*" He began to chuckle wheezily. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! Why that would be the end of the world indeed!"

In spite of herself Judy was deeply moved by the old man's transparent relief. Instinctively she put out her hand and laid it on his. "I don't know what your vision was, Mr. Spindrift," she said. "But if you feel I can be of help to you in any way...."

Spindrift brought his other hand across and patted hers abstractedly. "That is most kind of you, Mr. Harland," he murmured. "Really, most kind...."

At supper that evening the abbot stepped up to the lectern in the refectory and raised a hand for silence. The murmur of voices stilled as the brothers turned their

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wondering eyes towards their father superior. He surveyed them all in silence for a long moment and then said, "Brethren and honored guests... my friends. Here at Hautaire, we live a life whose fundamental pattern was laid down for us more than a thousand years ago. I believe it is a good life, one which has accordingly found favor in the eyes of God. My cherished hope is that a thousand years from now its pattern will have remained, in all essential respects, as it is today — that the spiritual verities enshrined in our foundation will be what they have always been — a source of comfort and reassurance to all God-loving men, a harbor of hope and tranquillity in a storm-tossed world."

He paused as though uncertain how to continue, and they all saw him close his eyes and turn his face upwards in mute prayer for a long, long minute. When at last he looked down upon them again, the silence in the hall was almost palpable.

"My friends, I have just learnt that certain European powers, acting in concert with Israel and the United States of America, have this afternoon launched an armed invasion of Saudi Arabia and the Trucial States."

There was a concerted gasp of horror and a sudden burst of whispering. The abbot raised his voice to carry over the hubbub.

"Their avowed aim is to secure for themselves access to the oil supplies which they deem essential to their national, political and economic survival. Under the terms of the Baghdad Treaty of 1979, the Arabs have called upon the Soviet Union for immediate armed assistance, and Russia and its allies have demanded the instant and total withdrawal of the invading forces. Failure to comply with this demand will, they say, bring about inevitable consequences."

He paused again and regarded them somberly. "I shall personally conduct a service for Divine Intercession immediately after complin. It will be held in the main chapel. It goes without saying that all our guests are invited to attend. *Dominus vobiscum.*" He sketched the sign of the Cross over them, stepped down from the lectern, and strode swiftly out of the hall.

In the outburst of chattering which erupted immediately the abbot had left the hall, Spindrift turned to Judy and seized her by the arm. "You must come with me, Mr. Harland," he whispered urgently. "At once."

Judy, who was still groping to come to terms with all the implications of what she had heard, nodded submissively and allowed the old man to shepherd her out of the refectory and up into the

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library. He unearthed the keys to the *oculus* and the rotunda, then hurried her up the stairs and along the deserted passages to the door which had remained locked for more than half a century. He was possessed by an almost feverish impatience and kept up an incessant muttering to himself the whole way. Judy could hardly make out a word of what he was saying, but more than once she thought she caught the strange word *Pikadon.* It meant nothing to her at all.

So much rubbish had accumulated in the narrow passage that they had to lean their combined weight against the rotunda door before they managed to force it open. They squeezed through into the crevice beyond, and Spindrift lit a candle he had brought with him. By its wavering light the two of them scuffled their way forward to the *oculus.*

When they reached it, Spindrift handed the key to Judy and held the candle so that she could see what she was doing. A minute later the door had creaked open to expose the sarcophagus, standing just as it had stood for the last seven hundred years.

Judy gaped at it in astonishment. "You mean you go in *there?*"

"*You* must, Mr. Harland," said Spindrift. "Please, hurry."

"But *why?*" demanded Judy. What good could it do?"

Spindrift gripped her by the shoulder and almost succeeded in thrusting her bodily into the casque. "Don't you understand, Mr. Harland?" he cried. "It is *you* who must prove my final vision false! *You have to prove me wrong!*"

Into her twenty-two years of life Judy had already packed more unusual experiences than had most women three times her age, but none of them had prepared her for this. Alone with a looney octogenarian who seemed bent on stuffing her into a stone coffin buried somewhere inside the walls of a medieval monastery! For all she knew, once he had got her inside, he would turn the key on her and leave her there to rot. And yet, at the very moment when she most needed her physical strength, it had apparently deserted her. Her arms, braced against the stone slabs, seemed all but nerveless; her legs so weak she wondered if they were not going to fold under her. "The key," she muttered. "Give me the key. And you go away. Right away. Back to that other door. You can wait for me there."

The pressure of Spindrift's hand relaxed. Judy stepped back and fumbled the key out of the lock. Then, feeling a little more confident, she turned to face the old man. By the trembling light of the candle she glimpsed the streaks of tears on his ancient cheeks.

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"Please go, Mr. Spindrift," she pleaded. *"Please."*

"But you will do it?" he begged. "I must *know*, Mr. Harland."

"Yes, yes," she said. "Sure I will. I give you my word."

He shuffled backwards a few doubtful paces and stood watching her. "Would you like me to leave you the candle?" he asked.

"All right," she said. "Put it down there on the floor."

She waited until he had done it, and then, aloud, she started to count slowly up to sixty. She had reached barely halfway before the rotunda was buffeted by the massive reverberating thunder of warplanes hurtling past high overhead. Judy shivered violently and, without bothering to finish her count, stepped the two short paces back into the casque until her shoulders were pressed against the cold stone. "Please, dear God," she whispered, "let it be all —"

She was falling, dropping vertically downwards into the bowels of the earth as if down the shaft of an elevator. Yet the candle, still standing there before her just where the old man had left it and burning with its quiet golden flame, told her that her stomach lied. But her sense of vertigo was so acute that she braced her arms against the sides of the coffin in an effort to steady herself. Watery saliva poured into her mouth. Certain she was about to faint, she swallowed and closed her eyes.

Like magenta fire balloons, the afterimages of the candle flame drifted across her retina. They changed imperceptibly to green, to dark blue, to purple and finally vanished into the velvety darkness. Her eyelids felt as though lead weights had been laid upon them.

Suddenly — without warning of any kind — she found herself gazing down, as if from a great height, upon a city. With the instant familiarity bred of a dozen high-school civics assignments, she knew it at once for her own hometown. The whole panoramic scene had a strange, almost dreamlike clarity. The air was unbelievably clear; no trace of smoke or haze obscured the uncompromising grid of the streets. Northwards, Lake Michigan glittered silver-blue in the bright sunshine, while the plum-blue shadows of drifting clouds ghosted silently across its placid waters. But this was no longer the Chicago she remembered. The whole center of the metropolis was gone. Where it had been was nothing but a vast circular smudge of grey rubble, along the fringes of which, green shrubs were already growing. No factory stacks smoked; no glittering lines of automobiles choked these expressways; no freight trains wriggled and jinked through these

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latticed sidings; all was as dead and still as a city on the moon. This was indeed Necropolis, City of the Dead.

At last the vision faded and its place was taken by another. She now found herself gazing out across a vast plain through which wound a great river. But the endless golden Danubian wheatfields which she remembered so well had all vanished. The winds which sent the towering cloud schooners scudding across this sky blew only through the feathered heads of weeds and wild grasses which stretched out like a green and rippling sea to the world's end. Of man, or cattle, or even flying bird there was no sign at all.

When Spindrift returned some twenty minutes later, it was to discover Judy crouched in the bottom of the sarcophagus, curled up like a dormouse with her head resting on her bent knees. Fearfully he stooped over her and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Mr. Harland," he whispered urgently. "Mr. Harland, are you all right?"

There was no response. He knelt down, thrust his hands beneath her arms and, by a mighty effort, succeeded in dragging her clear of the casque. She flopped sideways against the door, then sprawled forwards beside him. He fumbled his hand inside the neck of her shirt, felt for the beating of her heart, and so discovered who she was. The last dim flicker of hope died within him.

He patted her deathly cheeks and chafed her hands until at last her eyelids fluttered open. "What happened?" he asked. "What did you see?"

She raised a cold hand and wonderingly touched his wrinkled face with her fingertips. "Then it *hasn't* happened," she whispered. "And it was *so* real."

"It *will* happen," he said sadly. "Whatever it was you saw must come to pass. It always has."

"But there was no one," she mourned. "No one at all. What happened, Mr. Spindrift? Where had they all gone?"

"Come, my dear," he urged, gently coaxing her to her feet. "Come with me."

The air on the hillside was still warm, drowsy with the summer scents of wild sage, lavender and rosemary, as the old man and the girl made their way up the dim path towards the ridge where the ancient neoliths still bared themselves like broken teeth against the night sky. Below them, the abbey lights glowed out cheerfully, and small figures could be seen moving back and forth behind the chapel windows.

They reached a point where an outcrop of limestone had been

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roughly shaped into a seat. Spindrift eased himself onto it, drew Judy down beside him and spread out the wide skirt of his habit to cover her. As he did so, he could feel her trembling like a crystal bell that, once struck, goes on quivering far below the threshold of audible sound. An enormous, impotent grief seized him by the throat. Too late he saw what he should have done, how he had betrayed the trust that Brother Roderigo and the Abbé Ferrand had laid upon him. But he saw too, with a sort of numb clarity, how he, Spindrift, could not have done it because, within himself, some vital spark of faith in humanity had been extinguished far back in the blood-stained ruins of 1917. He could no longer believe that men were essentially good, or that the miracle which the genius of Peter Sternwärts had created would not be used in some hideous way to further the purposes of evil.

Yet what if he *had* gone that one step further, *had* published the *Exploratio Spiritualis* and given to all men the means of foreseeing the inevitable consequences of their insane greed, their overweening arrogance, their atavistic lust for power? Who was to say that Armageddon might not have been averted, that Peter's miracle might not have succeeded in shaping anew the human spirit? *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Ah, who indeed, if not God? And Spindrift's God had died in the mud of Ypres.

The full knowledge of what he had done rose as bitter as bile at the back of the old man's throat. Desperately he sought for some words of comfort for the girl who crouched beside him and could not stop quivering. Some lie, some little harmless. "I did not tell you before," he said, "but I believe you are destined to publish the *Spiritualis* for me. Yes, I remember now. That was how you were to be associated with my final vision. So, you see, there *is* still hope."

But even as he spoke, the distant eastern horizon suddenly flickered as though with summer lightning. His arm tightened involuntarily around the girl's shoulders. She stirred. "Oh God," she moaned softly. "Oh God, oh God, oh God." A harsh, grating sob shook her, and then another and another.

A second flash threw the low clouds into sharp relief, and then the whole arching roof of the world was lit up like the day. An urgent bell began tolling in the abbey.

Something scratched a line like a blood-red stalk high up into the southern sky, and a ball of blue-white fire blossomed in strange and sinister silence.

And later a wind got up and blew from the north.

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**They promised peace and comfort for his final years, the ultimate in retirement homes, a leisure cubicle in space . . .**

# Senior Citizen

## by CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

The music wakened him, and a soft, sweet, feminine voice said, "Good morning, Mr. Lee. If you should not, for the moment, remember, you are Anson Lee. You are a lucky senior citizen in your retirement home in space."

He sat up blindly and swung his feet out of bed. He sat on the edge of the bed and scrubbed his eyes with closed fists, ran a hand through his thinning hair. It would be nice if he could fall back on the bed again and get another hour of sleep.

"We have so much to do today, Mr. Lee," said the sweet voice, but it seemed to him that behind the sweetness he could detect the hidden steel of authority. Women, he thought — bitches, all of them.

"There is a nice change of clothes for you," the voice said. "Hurry up and dress. Then we'll have breakfast."

"I'll have breakfast, he thought. Not we, but I. You won't have any breakfast, for you aren't even here.

He reached out his hand for the clothes. "I don't like new clothes," he complained. "I like old clothes. I like to break them in and get them comfortable. Why do I have to have new clothes every day? I know what you do with my old clothes. You throw them in the converter every night when I take them off to go to bed."

"But these are nice," said the voice. "They are new and clean. The pants are blue, the shirt is green. You like blue and green."

"I like old clothes," he said.

"You cannot have old clothes," the voice said. "New clothing is so much better for you. And the clothing fits. It always fits. We have your measurements."

He put on the shirt. He stood up and put on the pants. There was no use in arguing, he knew. They always had their way. He never



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won. Just once he'd like to win. Just once he'd like to have old clothes. They were comfortable and soft, once you wore them for a while. He remembered his old fishing clothes. He'd had them for years and had treasured them. But now he had no fishing clothes. There was no place to fish.

"Now," said the voice, "we'll have breakfast. Scrambled eggs and toast. You like scrambled eggs."

"I won't eat any breakfast," he said. "I don't want any breakfast. I might be eating Nancy."

"What foolishness is this?" asked the voice, not so sweet, a little sharper now. "You remember Nancy's gone. She went away and left us."

"Nancy died," he said. "You put her in the converter. You put everything into the converter. We have only so much matter, and we must use it over and over again. I know the theory. I was a chemist. I know exactly how it works. Matter to energy, energy to matter. We are a closed ecology and...."

"But Nancy. It was so long ago."

"It doesn't matter how long ago it was. There's Nancy in the clothes. There'll be Nancy in the eggs."

"I think we'd better," said the voice, which was no longer sweet.

A hand reached out behind him and grasped him around the waist. "Let's have a look at you, old-timer," said a voice in his ear, this time an authorative voice, a man's voice.

He felt himself being urged into a cubicle. He was grasped by things other than hands. Tentacles wormed their way inside his clothes, fastened on his flesh. He could not move. A cold liquid sprayed forcefully against his arm. Then everything let loose of him.

"You're fine," said the hard, firm medic voice. "You are in finer shape than you were yesterday."

Yes, fine, he told himself. So fine that when he woke they thought it necessary to tell him who he was. So fine they had to shoot some dope into his arm to keep him from fantasizing.

"Come now," said the voice, grown sweet again. "Come and eat your breakfast."

He hesitated for a moment, trying to force himself to think. It seemed there was some reason he should not be eating breakfast, but he had forgotten. If there had ever been a reason.

"Come along, now," said the voice, wheedling.

He shuffled toward the table and sat down, staring at the cup of coffee, the plate of scrambled eggs.

"Now pick up your fork and eat," said the urgent voice. "It's the breakfast you like best. You have always told me you like scrambled

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eggs the best. Hurry up and eat. There's a lot to do today."

She was bullying him again, he told himself, patronizing him, treating him in the same manner she would use with a sulking child. But there was nothing he could do about it. He might resent it, but he could not act upon the resentment. He could never reach her. She was not really there. There was no one really there. They tried to make him think there was, but he knew he was alone. Even if he could not act upon the resentment, he tried to cherish it, but it slipped away. It was something, he knew, that was done in the diagnostic cubicle. Maybe it was the stuff they shot into his arm. Stuff to make him feel good, to block off resentment, to wipe the self-nagging from his mind.

Although it didn't really matter. Nothing really mattered. He drank his urine, he ate his feces, and it didn't really matter. And there was something else that he ate as well, but he could not remember. He had known once, but he had forgotten.

He finished the plate of eggs and drank the cup of coffee, and the voice said, "What will we do now? What would you like to do today. I can read to you or we can play some music or we can play cards or chess. Would you like to paint? You used to like to paint. You were very good at it."

"No, God damn it," he said. "I would not like to paint."

"Tell me why you don't want to paint. You must have a reason. When you do so well, you must have a reason."

Bullying him again, he thought, using schoolboy psychology upon him — and, worst of all, lying to him. For he could not paint. He did not do well at it. The daubs he turned out were not painting. But there was no use to go into that, he told himself; she would keep on insisting he did well at painting, operating on the conviction that the self-concept of the old must at all times be supported and improved upon.

"There's nothing to paint," he said.

"There are many things to paint."

"There are no trees, no flowers, no sky or clouds, no people. There once were trees and flowers, but now I'm not sure there are. I can't remember any more what a tree or flower looks like. A man can carry memory only for so long. There once were flowers and trees on Earth."

And there had been, as well, a house upon the Earth. But the house was dim in his memory as well. What did the house look like, he wondered. How does another human being look? What is a river like?

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"You do not need to see things to paint them," she said. "You can paint out of your mind."

Perhaps he could, he thought. But how do you paint loneliness? How does one depict dejection and abandonment?

When he made no answer, she asked, "There is nothing you want to do?"

He made no answer to her. Why bother to answer a simulated voice produced by a data core that was crammed with social welfare concepts and with little else? Why, he wondered, did they go to so much trouble to take good care of him? Although, come to think of it, perhaps it was not so much trouble as it might seem. The satellite would be out here, anyhow, gathering and monitoring data, perhaps performing other tasks of which he was not aware. And if such satellites could also serve to get the useless aged off the Earth, the care would cost them nothing.

He remembered how he and Nancy had been persuaded to make the satellite their home by a clever young man with a sincere and authoritative voice, carefully reciting all the benefits of it. Perhaps, even so, they would not have gone if their little house had not been condemned to make way for a transportation project. After that it had not really mattered where they'd gone or where they might be sent, for their home was gone. You'll be out of this world's rat race, the sincere young man had said. You'll have peace and comfort in your final years; everything will be done for you. All your friends are gone, and the changes that you see must be distressful to you; there's no reason you should stay.

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Your son? Why, he can come and see you as often, perhaps oftener, than you see him now — but, of course, he'd never come. Up there, you'll have everything you need. You'll never have to cook or clean; it'll be done for you. No more bother going to a doctor; there'll be a diagnostic cubicle just a step away. There'll be music and reading tapes and all your favorite programs, just like here on Earth.

Once a man gets old, he thought, he gets somewhat confused, and he's not sure of his rights and, even if he is, doesn't have the courage to stand up for them, nor the courage to face down authority, no matter how much he may despise authority. His strength is gone and the sharpness of his mind, and he is tired of fighting for his heritage.

Now, he thought, there was nothing left but the sweet authority (more hateful, perhaps, because it was so sweet) and the scarcely concealed contempt for the old, although the sweetness tried to hide it.

"Well, then," said the social-worker voice, "since you do not care to do anything, I'll leave you sitting here, by the port, where you can look out."

"There is no sense of looking out," he said. "There's nothing one can see."

"But there is," she said. "There are all the pretty stars."

Sitting by the port, he watched the pretty stars.

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## JOHN CLUTE

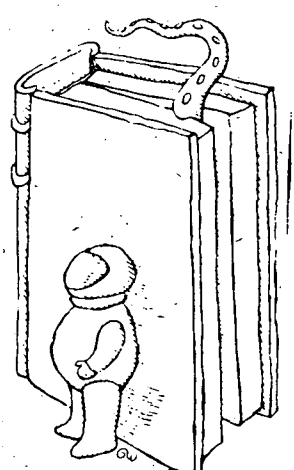
# Books

*The Wilk Are Among Us,* Isidore Haiblum, Doubleday, $5.95.

*Andromeda Gun,* John Boyd, Putnam, $5.95.

*Inheritors of Earth,* Gordon Eklund and Poul Anderson, Chilton, $6.50.

*Approaching Oblivion,* Harlan Ellison, Walker, $8.95.



Having clung this far to the century, we find salt flats, desolate marshes where the green revolution has failed and genres we have loved miscegenate in the slime like poleaxed dinosaurs, raddled by entropy and the death of ideology and the increasingly pyrrhic victories of technology against the planet, as a couple of the books on review may suggest, though not necessarily to their discredit, not necessarily. Still the center cannot hold and it begins to show. Harlan Ellison presents a clutch of newish stories that gnaw and nag, as usual, at conventions, taboos, coherence. Gordon Eklund joins Poul Anderson in, or maybe bamboozles him into, a collaborative effort that makes recent Van Vogts look positively *normal.* John Boyd grafts an sf ploy onto a western format, which allows him to say something new, and quite possibly lunatic, about the old injunction to seize the day. Isidore Haiblum kind of tells four or five stories simultaneously within one novel, parodying hard-boiled thrillers in the process, and making certain other jokes as well. To label all these works as science fiction (or fantasy) is like calling the Holy Roman Empire Rome. It is as marketing honorific. Nowadays it actually *sells* books.

Here and there in his new novel, *The Wilk Are Among Us,* Mr.

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Haiblum does pay a kind of perfunctory lip service to the numerous sf conventions he judo-chops in passing with his speedy grin, but it's a dizzy ride all the same, this guaranteed comic romp, one that leaves the reader a little drained. Though Haiblum's spoofing of the-aliens-are-among-us themes never quite dissolves into the confidence trick on our rights of expectation that it constantly threatens to become, there's still an uncomfortable sense of plundering to the book, a sense that its author has looted us of our rich, loving, ready memories of the conventions he quotes, and uses the energies thus released to fuel the jokes he plays on those conventions.

Take the protagonist, for instance. *The Wilk Are Among Us* is I-narrated by a being whom the author would have us think physically resembles an octopus. However, Mr. Haiblum makes no attempt to construct a character for this being that would in any way distinguish him (it's a male) from any typical native-born New Yorker, and goes so far as to call him Leonard. Perhaps that's a joke. Perhaps there's supposed to be a lesson behind it, that we're all really alike under the skin, which is a fine liberal lesson fictional New Yorkers are always embodying, one way or another. Unfortunately, what the text actually imparts is something altogether easier to put and less interesting to hear; under the skin, says Mr. Haiblum's version of Leonard, we are all the *same*. What Mr. Haiblum has neglected to invest his time in creating, consequently, the reader is forced to supply for himself out of that store of generic memories books like *Wilk* batten on: that is, some rudimentary mind's-eye rendering of "Leonard" as the alien he's supposed to be, else the whole story collapses into that egregious whimsy science fiction authors are so prone to.

On assignment to a quarantine planet where socially hostile species can be studied in isolation, Leonard finds himself under attack by a potpourri of misfits from all over the universe, none of them described with any more care than he is — a brace of Wilk, a hunter, a nill, and a hairy unnamed creature who got there by mistake from another dimension. "I thought of screaming, pleading, and praying all at once," I-narrates this octopus named Leonard, just like any other New Yorker you'd meet in an ethnic novel, though Leonard just may have three mouths and be able to carry it off. But the moment passes, we never learn about Leonard's capacities simultaneous-vocalization-wise, and soon become habituated to a style which speeds through solecisms like a newspaper

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article. Meanwhile, all four species, along with Leonard, are suddenly shot by his transmitter (a doubletalk device familiar to any reader of sf action tales) in the twinkling of an eye to a totally unfamiliar planet, which turns out to be Earth. Leonard soon discovers that his automatics (another doubletalk device which, being undescribed, operates whenever Mr. Haiblum needs to get a move on) have turned him into a member of the planet's dominant species. Leonard now has hands. He has been turned into a Wilk.

Though not quite. The story begins to speed up here, aided by a doubletalk translater and a doubletalk computer-link to Leonard's home base called the Wizard. It turns out that homo sapiens are sort of latent Wilk, which serves to add another species to the shambles. As neither species or doubletalk devices are tied to any working descriptions, the resulting noise is tremendous, and the general effect scatty. Transmitting, translating, Wizarding, and doing anything additional necessary to move the plot without explaining it via his handy automatics, Leonard eventually hares it through a hundred or so closely-similar episodes, and recaptures the various anti-social aliens. On the way home the reader gatecrashes a variety of story types, modes of narrative, characters human and otherwise, but is forced to quit them all (via transmitter or automatics) whenever there seems to be some point in remaining. And every once in a while he gets a chuckle out of it, the reader does. But he pays through the nose.

Genre-mixer John Boyd, on the other hand, homes in steadily to his zany climax. In his science fiction Western, *Andromeda Gun*, a photonic nebulosity named G-7 visits Nineteenth Century Earth, implants itself into a Western protagonist named Ian McCloud, and tries to puppet-master him into a state of moral rectitude. G-7's fate is like that of any Nervous Nellie from Harvard with an ounce of true grit beneath those effeminate, East Coast, pinko ways: seduced by the stinging vitality of his host, the sight of genuine human females in rut, the sheer *gumption* of the phenomenal world, and any number of other smarmy cliches out of Eric Frank Christopher Russel Anvil about how great it is to be a man, G-7 decides that what he should do with the rest of his light is, um, seize the day. But what does this mean to a bulb? Simple. First he's got to quarantine the planet, so that his fellow luminosities will stay clear, because with their lily-livered moral principles, their obsessive concern

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with energy conservation and the like, they wouldn't be able to understand about this seize the day stuff. No, G-7 admits.

> ...the ethereal race might be taking its righteousness too much for granted. Perhaps it had been force-fed precepts of harmonics and energy conservation that were not beyond being questioned. Possibly it was best that these human beings seize their revelry, live madly and upon the hour, then die.
>
> ...Looking on itself from the viewpoint of an Ian McCloud, it could see itself not as a message bearer but as a celestial meddler, flitting from one star group to another to invest more forcible hosts and impose on them the dull conformity of unrelieved goodness, the ethics of conservationism, interfering in the free movements of mobile organisms which loss of entropy was bound to get, anyway, sooner or later....
>
> ...Seize the day, G-7 thought. Don't conserve it.

That done, second and last, G-7 uses nearly the last of its remaining light to flit back into the skull of Ian McCloud, determined to make his host into the best seller of moonshine liquor to Reservation Indians the West has ever seen.

Leaving aside the odd notion that it's *loss* of entropy that causes the day to seize up in the end, because that may just be a slip of the pen, this quote still faces us with a pretty extraordinary declaration of animus against ecological or systems awareness (and hence against the real meaning of *carpe diem*), along with a covert but readily decipherable argument (couched in decrepit Goldwaterese) about man's inalienable right to ransack nature and to cheat other men because a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. G-7 certainly gets off on the smell of it. Sentiments of this sort certainly seem to fuel the light bulb's arguments that consumption is all, its plumping for a universe in which to *seize the day* means to *confiscate the goods.*

Not that the book itself is totally vitiated by the arguments it purports to give flesh to; the story of Ian McCloud's bulb-induced transition from gun-toting outlaw to financial respectability based on *fun graft* buzzes on from scene to scene with commendable speed, writing savvy, and some wit. When ideology does rear its ugly head, however, not only does it offend comsymps like myself, but it also serves to terminate the story long

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before the plot's worked out. Once G-7 gets its revelation about the dubious ethics of conservationism, we're forced to forget our involvement in Ian McCloud's rise to magnate status. There's a sound of gas escaping.

*Inheritors of Earth* is an awful, awful book. There is no way to describe it without rewriting it. A chapter-opening quotation demonstrates the case:

> It was far too cold out here for taking a walk. Alec had neglected to grab a coat when leaving the house and was now actually shivering from the chill. The sensible thing, if he wanted to do it, would be to turn right around this moment and hurry back to home and heat and bed. Sensible — yes — but he knew he wasn't going to do it. Sensibility was a state of mind that existed far beyond his present ability to accept. His feet kept moving — without conscious volition. Each additional step was a separate and individual motion. One — then another — and another. And, all this time, the house dwindled farther into the distance.

Although Gordon Eklund and Poul Anderson are both credited as authors of *Inheritors of Earth*, I do not believe that Poul Anderson wrote this passage. He may be sentimental at times; his storylines may derive more from pulp and less from mythopoeisis than he (or his protagonists) tend to think; he may sleep at the wheel. But he does not wamble like a spastic turkey on a skating rink. As I do not know the work of Gordon Eklund solo, I'm forced to posit its resemblance to turkey tracks sight unseen, which may be unfair, but look at the passage. Look at the first sentence: Is it too cold to take a walk together? or is it merely too cold to take a walk without a coat: See second sentence. See third sentence: Is it sensible to go back to the house whether or not he wants to? or is a sensible thing" to do only if it's something he *wants* to do?: But see fourth sentence: No it's not: Sensible is sensible, period. See fifth sentence: Sense and sensibility, as Jane Austen demonstrated in 1811 and the dictionary established on long before that, are not synonyms, repeat, not synonyms. See sixth sentence: Are we to remark on the presence of volitionless feet? or on the fact that walking had become solely a motor activity at this point?: Not the latter: See seventh sentence: Each step is "separate and individual,"

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not simply a motor activity, therefore we *are* supposed to remark on the presence of volitionless feet. See sixth sentence: See eighth sentence: Check. See ninth sentence: Are we supposed to remark on the fact that the house is not *keeping pace?*

End of paragraph.

See next paragraph (page 87). Alec gets out of sight of the house. It's a short paragraph. See next paragraph. It starts the chapter off again. See next paragraph. It starts the chapter for the third time. See Gordon Eklund learn about stretching copy. See Poul Anderson spanking Gordon Eklund very hard, don't you just wish.

At the very minimum, science fiction books should wear a style that resembles newspaper copy in it transparency to content; ideally, science fiction, like other forms of literature, should work towards a consciousness of the ultimate unity of form and content, a consciousness we on our side, as readers, do our best to tune out when we're trying to surrender ourselves to baroque, highly machined stories of the sort *Inheritors of Earth* claims to be. A priori, then, we give to our reading of *Inheritors of Earth* a kind of willed innocence, a gift from us as consumers to Gordon Eklund and Poul Anderson as producers. And the least we can expect in return is a book that doesn't gobble in our faces.

The story seems to begin on page 97, with Part Two of the book. Though I don't have a copy of the March 1951 issue of *Future Combined With Science Fiction Stories* to check, I wouldn't be surprised to see that Poul Anderson's original effort, "Incomplete Superman," begins at this point, and that all the maundering and shilly-shallying about of the first half of *Inheritors of Earth* must be the responsibility of his collaborator.

Starting at page 97 then, which enables us to avoid Van Vogt Yaw in the process, Van Vogt Yaw being what happens when short stories are tossed into a novel and get seasick, we see that a superior stock has somehow been grafted onto homo sapiens, and plans to take over. Complicating the picture are half-breeds, all of them sterile, like mules. These half-breeds don't know of the existence of the pure stock, and think *they* are the coming thing. Everyone gets worked into a fine frenzy. There's a new religion, and a saintly android, and a few humans, and a beautiful daughter. There is also a telepathic gestalt, comprised of an assemblage of these ingredients, lightly stewed, which defeats one of the supermen in another dimension at a crucial moment (it's the end of the book), resolving nothing but leaving one

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lonely omnipotent police officer with a ray of hope. It is not one of Poul Anderson's more characteristic tales. Fahrenheit 451 may solve the storage problem.

But Harlan Ellison provides a better bargain than usual. His new collection of short stories, *Approaching Oblivion,* not untypically subtitled *Road Signs on the Treadmill Toward Tomorrow,* reprints nothing from previous volumes of Harlan Ellison short stories, repeat, nothing. Only one of them — "Silent in Gehenna," already published in a couple of books — was familiar to me, to my misfortune, as I disliked it rather more the second time around. It's one of those stories whose climax is meant to have an admonitory, pistol-whipping sting to it, but which, in the event, merely jumps up and down and says *Gaaaaa!* Joe Bob Hickey is the last protester in a monstrous American police state. Everyone else is cowed. Apparently the cops are all there for *him.* He blows up a college or two and just before attempting to kidnap an administrative bigwig he's transliterated into another world or dimension, where he lives in a cage berating the aliens who own the place and who use him as a token conscience. This may be an allegory, but if it is, the lesson's too thick to slice. The reader fails to buy the self-pitying nuhdzing *gaaaaa* typical of solipsists trying to communicate....

Other stories, notably "Kiss of Fire" and "Catman," enable Mr. Ellison to focus his energies — they are very considerable indeed — into the depicting of worlds whose shapes are intricate enough, colored enough, bizarre enough, *realized* enough to provide verisimilitude for the kind of stories he likes to tell, the kind of protagonists he likes to infest them with. In these two stories, the dense, knotty believableness of the surround drowns out any sillinesses in the plots, any tendencies towards the primal *gaaaa* in the protagonists, and all's well, the darkness of the vision comes rifled at the reader, rather than blunderbussing about in search of a shape for itself, as so many of Mr. Ellison's earlier stories tended to do.

Of the tales in *Approaching Oblivion,* perhaps only the last one, "Hindsight: 480 Seconds," is genuinely embarrassing. Earth is doomed. Vastator — readers of *Phoenix in Ashes* please note — is a huge wandering planet and is due to carom off the sun. Mankind has set off for the stars in huge ships, leaving one poet, Haddon Brooks, to view and report on the devastation. He's a volunteer, one of ten thousand. He was selected because he was a poet. He

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composes a valedictory poem: "Vastator, the destroyer from the cold, Eating time at fifty thousand kilometers per second," and so forth. He looks up and sees that the sky is blue. "I've never seen it so blue," he says. "Water, all the way to Heaven. But there are no birds." And so forth. He quotes one of poor sloppy Randall Jarrell's awfullest poems, aloud, by radio-link, to his wife. And so on. When we come to his final utterance, before the seas boil, Mr. Ellison paraphrases it, which may be the next best thing to being struck wordless altogether, but does not rescue us from having our faces rubbed into the fact that he is simply not a poet, Mr. Ellison, any more than most other science fiction writers are poets, and that the idea of the poet as a *lyric songbird* still queers some pretty sophisticated pitches, Mr. Ellison's for instance. One black mark then, one or two *gaaas*, and some winners. You might ask for more, but of whom?

## BOOKS RECEIVED

*The Weird World of Gahan Wilson* - A new paperback collection of Gahan Wilson cartoons. This is recent work, selected from the syndicated feature *Gahan Wilson's Sunday Comics*, which you may have seen in your local paper. If not, get your local paper to pick it up, or buy this book. (Tempo Books, $.95)

*Science Fiction Book Review Index, 1923-1973*, edited by H. W. Hall - Handsome and sturdy production (hard-cover) that offers "a complete record of all books — including non-science fiction books — reviewed in the science fiction magazines from 1923 to 1973, and a record of all science fiction and fantasy books reviewed from 1970 to 1973 in selected general magazines, library magazines and amateur magazines (fanzines)." (Gale Research Co., Book Tower, Detroit, Mich. 48226, 438 pages, $45.00)

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**Cordwainer Smith was the pen name for Dr. Paul M. A. Linebarger, Professor of Asiatic Politics at the School of Advanced International Studies of The Johns Hopkins University. As Cordwainer Smith he contributed perhaps two dozen distinctive short stories to this field, beginning with "Scanners Live In Vain," 1950. The story below, never before published, was completed by his wife after his death.**

# Down To A Sunless Sea

## by CORDWAINER SMITH

*High oh, high oh, they jingle in the sky oh! Bright how bright the light of those twin moons of Xanadu, Xanadu the lost, Xanadu the lovely, Xanadu the seat of pleasure. Pleasure of the senses, body, mind, soul. Soul? Who said anything about soul?*

I

Where they were standing the wind whispered softly. From time to time Madu in an ageless feminine gesture tugged at her tiny silver skirt or adjusted her equally nominal open sleeveless jacket. Not that she was cold. Her abbreviated costume was appropriate to Xanadu's equable climate.

She thought: "I wonder what he will be like, this Lord of the Instrumentality? Will he be old or young, fair or dark, wise or foolish?" She did not think "handsome or ugly." Xanadu was noted for the physical perfection of its inhabitants, and Madu was too young to expect anything less.

Lari, waiting beside her, was not thinking of the Space Lord. His mind was seeing again the video tapes of the dancing, the intricate steps and beautiful frenzy of movement of the group from ancient days on Manhome, the group labeled "Bawl-shoy." "Someday," he thought, "oh, perhaps someday I too can dance like that...."

Kuat thought: "Who do they think they're fooling? In all the years I've been governor of Xanadu this is the first time a Lord has been here. War hero of the battle of



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Styron IV indeed! Why, that's been over substantive months ago.... He's had plenty of time to recover if it's really true he was wounded. No, there's something more...they know or suspect something...Well, we'll keep him busy. Shouldn't be hard to do here with all the pleasures Xanadu has to offer...and there's Madu. No, he can't complain or he'll blow his cover...."

And all the while, as the ornithopter neared, their destiny was approaching. He did not know that he was to be their destiny; he did not intend to be their destiny, and their destiny had not been predetermined.

The passenger in the descending ornithopter reached out with his mind to try to perceive the place, to sense it. It was hard, terribly hard...there seemed to be a thick cloud-like cover — a mist — between his mind and the minds he tried to feel. Was it himself, his mind damage from the war? Or was it something more, the atmosphere of the planet — something to deter or prevent telepathy?

Lord bin Permaiswari shook his head. He was so full of self-doubt, so confused. Ever since the battle...the mind-scarring probes of the fear machines...how much permanent damage had they done? Perhaps here on Xanadu he could rest and forget.

As he stepped from the ornithopter Lord bin Permaiswari felt an even greater sense of bewilderment. He had known that Xanadu had no sun, but he was unprepared for the soft shadowless light which greeted him. The twin moons hung, seemingly, side by side, while their light was reflected by millions of mirrors. In the near distance li after li of white sand beaches stretched, while farther on stood chalk cliffs with the jet-black sea foaming at their bases. Black, white, silver, the colors of Xanadu.

Kuat approached him without delay. Kuat's sense of apprehension had diminished appreciably at the first glimpse of the Space Lord. The visitor did indeed look ill and confused; correspondingly, Kuat's amiability increased without conscious effort on his part.

"Xanadu extends you welcome, oh Lord bin Permaiswari. Xanadu and all that Xanadu contains is yours." The traditional greeting sounded strange in his rough tones. The Space Lord saw before him a huge man, tall and correspondingly heavy, muscles gleaming, his longish reddish hair and beard showing magenta in the light of the moons and mirrors.

"It gives me pleasure, Governor Kuat, merely to be in Xanadu, and I return the planet and its contents to you," replied Lord Kemal bin Permaiswari.

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Kuat turned and gestured toward his two companions.

"This is Madu, a distant relative, and so my ward. And this is Lari, my brother, son of my father's fourth wife — she who drowned herself in the Sunless Sea." The Space Lord winced at Kuat's laugh, but the young people appeared not to notice it.

Gentle Madu hid her disappointment and greeted the Lord with becoming modesty. She had expected (hoped for?) a shining figure, a blazing armor, or perhaps simply an aura which proclaimed "I am a hero." Instead she saw an intellectual-looking man, tired, looking somehow older than his substantive thirty years. She wondered what he had done, how this man could be the talk of the Instrumentality as the savior of human culture in the battle of Styron IV.

Lari, because he was a male, knew more of the facts of the battle than Madu, and he greeted Lord bin Permaiswari with grave respect. In his dream world, second only to dancers and runners of easy grace, Lari looked up to intelligence. This was the man who had dared to pit himself, his living mind, his intellect against the dread fear machines...and won! The price was evident in his face, but he had WON. Lari placed his hands together and held them to his forehead in a gesture of homage.

The Lord reached out in a gesture which won Lari's heart forever. He touched Lari's hand and said, "My friends call me Kemal." Then he turned to include Madu and, almost as an afterthought, Kuat.

Kuat did not notice the near omission. He had turned and was walking toward what appeared to be a huge lump of yellow and black-striped fur. He made a peculiar hissing sound, and at once the lump separated into four enormous cats. Each cat was saddled, and each saddle was equipped with a holding ring, but there was no apparent means of guiding the cats.

Kuat answered Kemal's question. "No, of course there's no way to guide them. They're pure cat, you know, unmodified except for size. No underpeople here! I think we're the only planet in the Instrumentality that doesn't have underpeople — except for Norstrilia, of course. But the reasons for Norstrilia and Xanadu are at the opposite ends of the spectrum. We enjoy our *senses*...none of that nonsense about hard work building character like the Norstrilians believe. We don't believe in austerity and all that malarky. We just get more sensual pleasure out of our unmodified animals. We have robots to do the dirty work."

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Kemal nodded. After all, wasn't that what he was here for? To allow his senses to repair his damaged mind?

Nonetheless, the man who had faced the fear machines with scarcely a tremble did not know how to approach the cat which was designated as his.

Madu saw his hesitation. "Griselda is perfectly friendly," she said. "Just wait a minute till I scratch her ears; then she'll lie down and you can mount."

Kemal glanced up and caught an expression of disgust in Kuat's eyes. It did not help in his search for self-mending.

Madu, oblivious to Kuat's displeasure, had coaxed the great cat to kneeling position and smiled up at Kemal.

Kemal felt something like pain stab him at her glance. She was so beautiful and so innocent; her vulnerability wrenched at his heart. He remembered the Lady Ru's quotation of an ancient sage: "Innocence within is armor without," but a web of fear settled on his mind. He brushed it aside and mounted the cat.

As he lay dying nearly three centuries later, he remembered that ride. It was as thrilling as his first space jump. The leap into nothingness and then the sudden realization that he was traveling, traveling, traveling without volition, with no personal control over the direction his body might take. Before fear had the opportunity to assert itself it was converted into a visceral, almost orgasmic excitement, a gush of pleasure almost too strong to bear.

Lank dark hair flying in his face, the Lord bin Permaiswari would have been unrecognizable to the Lords and Ladies who gathered at the Bell on old Earth in time of crisis. They would not have recognized the boyish glee in a face which they were accustomed to seeing as grave and preoccupied. He laughed in the wind and tightened his knees against Griselda's flanks, holding the saddle ring with one hand as he turned back to wave at the others who were somewhat behind.

Griselda seemed to sense his pleasure at her long effortless bounds. Suddenly the ride took on a new proportion. Overhead the ornithopter which had brought the Space Lord to Xanadu passed by on its way back to the spaceport. At once Griselda left the pride and leapt futilely after the ascending ornithopter. As she attempted to bat at it, Kemal was forced to use both hands on the holding ring in order not to fall off ignominiously. She continued to leap and bat hopelessly in its direction until it disappeared from sight. Then she

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sat down to lick herself and, inadvertently, her passenger.

Lord Kemal found her sandpaper tongue not unpleasant, but he winced as her fang brushed his leg. At some distance Kuat sat laughing. Madu's face, even in the distance showed concern, however, which cleared as the Lord waved to her. Lari, confident in the powers of the hero of Styron IV, was gazing dreamily at the distant city.

Slowly now, Griselda joined the rest of the pride, her attitude apparently one of some embarrassment at having performed such a kittenish prank when she had been entrusted with the welfare of the distinguished visitor.

In the distance the domes and towers of the city gleamed nacreous in the soft shadowless light of the moons and mirrors. Lord Kemal had his sense of unreality reinforced. The city looked so beautiful and so unreal that he had the feeling it might vanish as they approached. He was to learn that the city and all it stood for were all too real.

As they neared the city walls, Kemal could see that the stark whiteness of the city from afar was an illusion. The shimmering white walls of the buildings were set with gemstones in intricate patterns, flowers, leaves, and geometric designs all heightening the beauty of the incredible architecture. In all the worlds he had visited Lord Kemal had seen nothing to equal this city; Philip's palace on the Gem Planet was a hovel compared to these buildings.

Formal gardens with fountains and artificial pools separated the buildings. Shrubbery in an artful plan which gave the appearance of being natural was planted here and there. Suddenly the Space Lord realized another strange aspect of the planet: he had seen no trees.

Dogs yipped at them from safe distances as they entered the city, but this time Griselda refused to be tempted. Now that she was in the city she had assumed a certain dignity; it was as if she wanted to forget her previous dereliction. She headed straight for the palace steps.

Lord Kemal could feel the muscles of Griselda's haunches tighten as she prepared to hurdle up the steps and through the open door. It would be a tight squeeze for the two of them. Fortunately Kuat reached the steps first and hissed his command to her. Kemal could feel her reluctance. She would much have preferred bounding up the steps, but she obeyed. She lay belly down, back feet crouched, front feet stretched forward; the Lord Kemal dismounted easily but with reluctance, a regret almost as great as Griselda's that the ride was over. He

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reached over to scratch the cat's ears.

Madu smiled approvingly. "That's right. When you make friends with your cat, she'll obey you much more readily."

Kuat grunted. "I have my own way for making them obey if they get too many ideas of their own." For the first time the Space Lord noticed a small barbed whip tucked into Kuat's belt, to which Kuat pointed now.

"Kuat, you wouldn't," Madu protested. "You never have..."

"You haven't seen me," he said. Then as her face clouded he added as if reassuringly: "Up to now I haven't needed to. But don't think I wouldn't."

Kemal noticed that Kuat's reassurance was not quite adequate. A gauze of doubt or wonder seemed to obscure the open brightness of Madu's face. Once more the Lord Kemal felt a stab of fear for her and once more dismissed it.

It was her innocence he feared for. He found that her eyes reminded him of D'irena from the ancient days of his true youth — before he had been made wise in the ways of mankind, before he had been made to know that underpersons and true men could not mix as equals. D'irena with the fawnlike grace, the soft gentle mouth, the innocent eyes of the doe she was derived from. What had happened to her after he left? Did her eyes still hold that candid ingenuousness which he saw mirrored in Madu's eyes? Or had she mated with some gross stag and had some of his grossness transferred itself to her?

He hoped, remembering her fondly, that she had mated with a fine buck who had given her does as gentle and as graceful as she was in his memory. He shook his head. The fear machines had stirred up all kinds of strange memories and feelings. Absently, he petted the cat.

Servants came forward to unsaddle the cats. With a renewed start the Space Lord realized that these were true men, not underpersons, doing work, and he remembered Kuat's statement about enjoying the sensuality of animals. There was something else, something he had almost thought of, but he could not quite think... it was as if he tried to catch the tail of an elusive animal as it disappeared around the corner.

Led by Kuat and trailed by Madu and Lari, the Lord Kemal threaded his way through a maze of rooms and corridors. Each seemed more amazing than the last. The only time the Space Lord had seen anything similar had been on the videotapes — a reconstruction of old Manhome as it had been before

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Radiation III. The walls were hung with tapestries and paintings based on reproductions of those from Earth; couches, statues, rugs of color and warmth brought here by Xanadu's founder, the original Kahn. Yes, Xanadu was a return to pleasure of the senses, to luxury and beauty, to the unnecessary.

Kemal felt himself beginning to relax in this atmosphere of enchantment, but the spell was broken when, upon reaching the main salon, Kuat unceremoniously flung himself into the nearest couch. As he stretched full length, he vaguely waved a hand to the rest of the party.

"Sit down, sit down," he said. Candles flickered and glowed; low tables and couches stood about invitingly.

For the first time since the introduction on the Space Lord's arrival Lari spoke spontaneously. "We welcome you to our home," he said, "and hope that we can do all possible to make your visit enjoyable.

Kemal realized that he had paid little attention to the youth because he had been so absorbed in new impressions, and (he had to admit it to himself) the girl Madu had fascinated him. Lari, in his own way, was as physically perfect as Madu. Tall, slender, lightly muscled, a golden boy. And, like Madu, he had a curious air of openness, of vulnerability. It seemed strange to the Lord Kemal that these two should grow up so innocent under the guardianship of a man as coarse and boorish as Kuat seemed.

Kuat interrupted his reverie. "Come! The dju-di!"

Madu immediately moved toward a table on which rested a copper-colored tray with silvery highlights. On the tray sat a dual-spouted pitcher of the same material and eight small matching goblets. A lid covered the top of the pitcher. As Madu picked up the pitcher, Kuat gave one of the grunts which the Space Lord was finding increasingly distasteful.

"Just be sure you put your thumb over the right hole."

Her answering tone was indulgent but as nearly scornful as Kemal could imagine her being. "I've been doing this since childhood. Is it likely I'd forget now?"

In after years it seemed to Kemal bin Permaiswari that this night was one of the important turns that his life took in its convoluted passage through time. He seemed removed from events as they occurred; he seemed a spectator, watching the actions, not only of the others but of himself as if he had no control over them, as if in a dream....

Madu knelt gracefully and placed a thumb over one of the two

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holes at the top of the pitcher. Candlelight played over the light silvery dusting of powder which covered the entire area of her bare skin. As she poured the reddish liquid into four of the little goblets, Kemal noticed that even the nails of her small hands were painted silver.

Kuat raised his goblet. The first toast by the rules of politeness should have been to the guest of honor, or at the very least to the Instrumentality, but Kuat went by his own rules.

"To pleasure," he said, and drank the contents with one gulp.

While the rest of the party slowly sipped their drinks, Kuat roused himself to pour another cupful. He had swallowed the second cupful before the others had finished their first.

The Lord Kemal savored the taste of the dju-di. Unlike anything he had ever tasted before, neither sweet nor sour, it was more like the juice of pomegranate than any other flavor he had tasted, and yet it was unique.

As he sipped he felt a pleasant tingling sensation pervade his body. By the time he had finished the cup he had decided that dju-di was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted. Instead of muddling his wits like alcohol or conferring nothing but sensual pleasure like the electrode, dju-di seemed to heighten all his senses, his awareness. All colors were brighter, background music of which he had been only dimly aware was suddenly piercingly lovely, the texture of the brocaded couch was a thing of joy, perfumes of flowers he had never known overwhelmed him. His scarred mind rejected Styron IV and all its implications. He felt a glow of comradeship, momentarily even toward Kuat, and suddenly felt he had come against a Diamoni wall.

Then he knew. His inability to sense or to read the other minds on this planet did not lie within himself or any defect incurred through the fear machines but was directly connected to Kuat, to some nonauthorized barrier which Kuat had erected. The barrier was imperfect, however. Kuat had not been able merely to keep his own thoughts from being read; he had had to set up a universal barrier. This was obvious from the fact that Kuat showed no indication that he could sense the Space Lord.

"And what," thought Kemal, "do you have to hide? What is so much against the laws of the Instrumentality that you have had to set up a universal mind barrier?"

Kuat, relaxed, smiled pleasantly.

For the first time since Styron IV the Lord Kemal bin Permaiswari felt that he might in truth recover

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completely. It was the first time he had felt really interested in anything.

Madu brought him back to his present situation.

"You like our dju-di?" It was hardly a question.

Kemal nodded, blissful and still absorbed in the puzzle he had encountered.

"You may have one more," she said, "but that is all that is good for you. After that, one begins to lose one's senses, and *that,* after all, is *not* pleasurable, is it?"

She poured the second cup for Kemal, for Lari and herself.

Kuat reached for the pitcher, and she slapped playfully at his hand. "One more and you might pour yourself pisang by accident."

He laughed. "I am bigger than most men and can drink more than they."

"At least let me pour it then," she said, and proceeded to do so.

She turned again to the Space Lord with a playful gaiety which did not ring quite true. "He is one whom we must all indulge; but, really, it is dangerous to have too much. You see how this pitcher is made?"

She took off the lid to demonstrate the division of the pitcher. "In one half is dju-di; in the other there is pisang which is identical in taste to dju-di, but it is deadly. One cup kills anyone drinking it within eefunjung." Involuntarily Kemal shuddered. The unit of time she mentioned was so small as to be almost instantaneous.

"No antidote?"

"None."

Lari, who had been sitting quietly, now spoke. "It is the same thing, really. Dju-di is the distilled pisang. They come from a fruit which grows here, only on Xanadu. Galaxy knows how many people must have died eating the fruit or drinking the fermented but undistilled pisang before the secret of dju-di was discovered."

"Worth every one of them," Kuat laughed. Any remaining warmth engendered by the dju-di which the Space Lord might have felt toward the Governor of Xanadu was dissipated. His curiosity regarding the duality of the pitcher, however, was aroused.

"But if you know that pisang is poison, why do you keep it in the same container with dju-di? For that matter why do you keep it in its undistilled state at all?"

Madu nodded agreement. "I have often asked the same question, and the answers I get make no sense."

"It's the excitement of danger," Lari said. "Don't you enjoy the dju-di more knowing there's the element of chance you'll get pisang?"

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"That's what I said," Madu repeated, "the answers make no sense."

At this point Kuat broke in. His speach was slightly slurred, but he spoke intelligently enough. "In the first place, there is tradition. In the old days, under the first Kahn and before Xanadu came under the jurisdiction of the Lords of the Instrumentality, there was a great deal of lawlessness on Xanadu. There were power struggles for leadership. People came here from other planets to plunder our richness. There had to be some simple way of eliminating them before they knew they were being eliminated. The double pitcher is copied, so they say, from a Chinesian one brought by the first Kahn. I don't know about that, but it has become traditional here. You won't find a dju-di holder on Xanadu without its corresponding pisang holder." He nodded wisely as if he had explained everything, but the Space Lord was not satisfied.

"All right," he said, "you make the pitchers in the traditional way, but why, by Venus' clouds, must you continue to put pisang in them?"

Kuat's answer, when it came, was in even more slurred tones than his previous speech; the effects of too much dju-di began to make him sound intoxicated, and the Space Lord made mental note to heed Madu's injunctions not to exceed two cupfuls of the drink. Kuat gave a rather leering smile and wagged a finger admonishingly at Lord Kemal.

"Strangers mustn't ask too many questions. Might still be enemies around and we're all prepared. Anyway, that's the way we execute criminals on Xanadu." His laugh was uninhibited. "They don't know what they're getting. It's like a lottery. Sometimes I tease them a little. Give them dju-di first, and they start to think they're going to be freed. Then I give them another cup, and they don't suspect a thing. Drink it happily because nothing happened with the first cup. Then when the paralysis hits them — ha! you should see their faces!"

For an instant the latent dislike which the Space Lord had conceived for Kuat sprang full grown. But the man's intoxicated, in effect, he thought. And then: But is this the real man speaking?

"No, no, Kuat, you don't mean that!"

Realization seemed to return to Kuat. He gave his brother's knee a reassuring pat. "No, no, course don't. Think I'll go to bed. You'll take care of guest, won't you?"

He staggered slightly as he stood up but managed to walk fairly steadily from the room.

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Suddenly the barrier was down slightly. He could not read Kuat's mind, but the Space Lord could sense, somewhere on the planet, something evil, strange, unlawful. A coldness seemed to replace the warmth of the dju-di in his veins.

*Across the white dunes the wind was beginning to rise. Far from the city, protected by the ancient crater lake of the sunless sea, the laboratory had a deceptive exterior placidity. Within, the illegal diehr-dead, not yet quite sentient, stirred in their ambiotic fluid; outside, trees bearing their deadly fruit seemed to quiver as if in dread anticipation.*

Madu sighed. "I knew he shouldn't have had that last one, but he would do it." She turned toward Lari, oblivious of the Space Lord, and said reassuringly:

"Of course he didn't mean what he said about teasing the prisoners. He's been so good to us all these years...nobody could be so kind to us and cruel in other ways could he?"

Once more the Space Lord glanced in Lari's direction. The handsome young face, vital but young, so young, held a look of uneasiness. "No, I suppose not, and still I've heard tales...." He broke off, remembering the presence of the Space Lord. "Of course it's all nonsense," he concluded, but Lord Kemal had the feeling that he was trying as much to reassure himself as to erase the bad impression his brother had made.

"We will eat now," Madu said brightly, and stood up to go into the dining salon. Again the Space Lord felt as if the subject were being changed.

II

In after years the Space Lord remembered. Thoughts raced through his mind. *Oh, Xanadu, there is nothing with which to liken you in all the galaxies. The shadowless days and nights, the treeless plains, the sudden rainless blasts of thunder and lightning which somehow add to your charm. Griselda. The only pure animal I ever knew. The great rumbling purr, the soft pink nose with the black spot on one side, the eyes which seemed to look beyond the features of my face into my very being. Oh, Griselda, I hope that somewhere you still bound and leap....*

But now: the first few days of the Lord Kemal bin Permaiswari on Xanadu passed quickly as he was introduced to the infinite pleasures of Xanadu.

On the day following Kemal's arrival a footrace had been scheduled in which Lari was to run. The element of competition which had been brought back to Xanadu was part of a deliberate

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return to the simpler joys which mankind in its mechanization had forgotten.

Crowds at the stadium were gay and bright. Most of the young girls wore their hair loose and flowing; the women, old and young alike, wore the typical costume of Xanadu: tiny short skirt and open sleeveless jacket. On most worlds the older women would have looked grotesque or at least ludicrous in this costume, and the younger women would have seemed lewd. But on Xanadu there was a basic innocence and acceptance of the body, and almost without exception the women of Xanadu, irrespective of age, seemed to have retained their lovely lithe figures, and there was no false modesty to call attention to their seminudity.

Most of the young people, male and female alike, wore the shimmering body powder which the Space Lord had first noted on Madu; some matched the powder to their clothes, others to their hair or eyes. A few wore a colorless luminescent dusting. Of them all, the Space Lord thought Madu the loveliest.

She radiated excitement, a portion of which communicated itself to Lord Kemal. Kuat seemed unemotional.

"How can you sit there so calmly?" she asked.

"The boy'll win, you know. Anyway horse racing is more exciting."

"For you, maybe. But not for me."

Lord Kemal was interested. "I have never seen this racing," he said. "What is it? The horses all run together to see which is the fastest?"

Madu nodded agreement. "They all start at a given signal and run a predetermined path. The one who reaches the goal first is the winner. He," she nodded her head playfully in Kuat's direction, "likes to bet, that is to wager, that his horse will win. That is why he likes horse races better than human races."

"And you have no wager on the human races?"

"Oh, no. It would be degrading to human beings to wager on their abilities or accomplishments!"

There were three races that day, each one narrowing the field of contestants. It became evident even in the first race that there was no real competition; Lari so far outdistanced the others that it was almost embarrassing. If he had not so obviously been a superb runner, it would have been easy to assume that the others had held back in order to allow the brother of the governor of Xanadu to win.

Kuat went off to the center of the stadium to participate in a copy of an ancient ritual from old

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Manhome in which a crown of golden leaves was set on Lari's hair.

In his absence, Lord Kemal heard various whisperings behind him in which he caught the words "dance with the aroi," "old governor will be pleased," "too bad his mother...." Madu seemed not to be listening.

After the celebrations when the Governor and his party had returned to the palace, Lord Kemal remembered the curious phrases; in particular he was puzzled by the present or future tense of "old governor *will be* (not "would have been") pleased." It stuck in his mind and fretted there, like a splinter in a sore finger. His mind was only just recovering from the wounds of the fear machines, and he decided he could not risk a further infection.

While Kuat was having his second goblet of dju-di, Lord Kemal said, most casually, "How long have you been governor of Xanadu, Kuat?"

The latter glanced up, sensing something beneath the casualness of the immediate question.

Lari interrupted. "I was a small baby —"

Kuat's gesture silenced him. "For many years," he said. "Does it matter how many?"

"No, I was curious," said the Space Lord, deciding on modified candor. "I thought that the governorship of Xanadu was hereditary, but I heard something today which made me believe that the governor your father was still alive."

Again Lari, before Kuat could silence him, rushed to answer. "But he is. He's with the aroi...that's why my mother —"

Kuat's frown silenced him.

"These are not matters for the Instrumentality. These are matters of Xanadu's local customs, protected by Article #376984, subarticle *a*, paragraph 34c of the instrument under which Xanadu agreed to come under the protection of the Instrumentality. I can assure the Lord that only domestic matters of purely autochthonous origin are concerned."

Lord Kemal nodded in ostensible agreement. He felt that he had somehow uncovered another small portion of the mystery which intrigued him, interested him as nothing else had done since Styron IV.

## III

On the fourth "day" of his stay on Xanadu, Lord Kemal went out with Madu and Lari for his first expedition beyond the walls of the city since his arrival. By this time, the Space Lord had become quite fond of the cat Griselda. It pleased him inordinately when she gave a great purr of pleasure and lay down

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for him to mount without awaiting a command.

He saw animals in a new light. With poignancy he knew that underpersons, modified animals in the shape of human beings, were truly neither one thing nor the other. Oh, there were underpersons of great intelligence and power but...he let the thought trail off.

They raced across the plains with a singular joy. Windswept, treeless, the small planet had a wild beauty of its own. The black sea lashed at the foot of the chalk cliffs. Kemal, watching the li's of sand, felt the strangeness of the place once more. In the distance he saw a great bird rise, falter, then fall.

Later, much later, the song the computer wrote when he fed it the facts of time and place became known throughout the galaxies:

On a dark mountain
Alone in the cloud
The eagle paused
And the wind shrieked
aloud
The thunder rolled
And the mist of the cloud
Formed the eagle's shroud
As it fell to the ground
Wings battered and torn.

And the surf
At the foot
Of the cliff
Was white
That night,
And bright
The wings
Of the falling
Bird.

I heard
The cry.

Perhaps it was a testimony to the depth of his feeling that the Lord Kemal fed these facts to the computer in such a way that some of his agony was expressed.

Madu and Lari watched also as the bird fell, their bright joy overcast by something they could not quite comprehend.

"But why?" Madu whispered. "It flew along as freely as we were riding, we bounded as it soared, all free and happy. And now...."

"And now we must forget it," said the Space Lord, of a wisdom born of endless endurance and a wariness he wished he did not feel. But he himself could not forget it. Hence the computer.

"On a dark mountain...."

More slowly now, chilled by the death of beauty, of life, they proceeded, each involved in thought.

"What waste!" the Space Lord thought. What waste of beauty. The bird had soared free as a dream. Why? A strange current of air? Or something more deadly?

"What did my mother feel?"

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thought Lari. "What were her feelings and thoughts when she walked into the warm deep dark sea — and knew she would never return?"

Madu felt confused and lonely. It was the first time that she personally had ever confronted death in any form. Her parents were unreal to her; she had never known them. But this bird — she had seen it alive and free, flying, concerned with nothing more important than its graceful glides and soaring; and now, suddenly, it was dead. She could not reconcile the two thoughts in her mind.

It was Lord Kemal who, because of his age and experience, recovered first. "You haven't told me," he said, "where we are going."

Madu's smile was a feeble echo of her usual glow, but she made the effort. "We're going to ride around the edge of the crater up there by the peak. It's a beautiful view, and when you stand there you can almost get the idea that you can see the whole planet."

Lari nodded, determined to participate in the conversation despite the dark thoughts which had clouded his mind. "It's true," he said. "You can even see the grove of buah trees from there. It's from the fruit of the buah trees that we get pisang and dju-di."

"I was curious about that," the Space Lord said. "I haven't seen a tree since I landed on the planet."

"No," said Madu and Lari simultaneously. It created a small diversion, and they both laughed spontaneously, acting more naturally than they had since the death of the bird. Unconsciously they communicated their more cheerful attitude to the cats, which now began to bound forward once more at increased speed.

The Space Lord's happiness at the upswing in spirits of his young companions was tempered with chagrin that the conversation, which had started to be interesting, could not continue while their steeds were proceeding at this breakneck speed.

As they continued uphill, however, the cats gradually began to slow. The change was imperceptible at first, but as the long climb continued, Lord Kemal could feel Griselda's increasing effort. He had begun to think that nothing could tire her, but the climb to the edge of the crater was considerably longer than it looked from below.

That the other cats were also feeling the strain was evident from their decreased pace.

The Space Lord reopened the conversation. "You were going to tell me about the trees," he said.

It was Lari who answered first. "You are quite right about not having seen any trees," he said.

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"The only trees which grow on Xanadu except the buah trees are the Kelapa trees, and they grow down in the craters of the smaller volcanoes. You can see some of *them* too when we get to the crater rim. But the buah trees always grow in groves — there must be both male and female to bear fruit, and the fruit can only be approached at certain times. Otherwise, even to inhale the scent is deadly."

Madu gravely concurred. "We must always keep at a distance from the buah grove until Kuat has consulted with the aroi, and when he tells us the time is right, then everyone on Xanadu participates in the harvest. The aroi dance, and it is the best time of all...."

Lari shook his head, disapprovingly. "Madu, there are things we don't talk about to outsiders."

Her face suffused, eyes suddenly welling, she stammered, "But a Lord of the Instrumentality...."

Both men realized her unhappiness, and each in his own way hastened to remedy it. The Space Lord said, "I'm good at not remembering things I shouldn't."

Lari smiled at her and put his right hand hard on her shoulder. "It's all right. He understands, and you didn't mean any harm. We won't either of us say anything to Kuat."

As he lay in his room after dinner, the Space Lord tried to reconstruct the afternoon. They had reached the rim of the crater and it had been as Madu said: one could feel as if the horizon were infinite. The Space Lord had felt an overwhelming sense of the magnitude of infinity, something he had never quite experienced to this degree before in all of his trips through space or time. And yet there had been a small nagging feeling that something was not quite right.

Part of the feeling was associated with the grove of buah trees. He was sure that he had glimpsed a building as the uncertain, sometimes gusting, sometimes gentle wind blew the buah branches. He had not mentioned his observation to the young people. It was probably something else autochthonous and therefore forbidden to discussion, or surely one of them would have mentioned it.

He searched his memory (yes, he felt, his mind was definitely recovering) for a person among the servants at the palace who might be willing to talk to a Lord of the Instrumentality. Suddenly he remembered something of which he must have made subliminal note at the time without being consciously aware. One of the men in the cat stable. What was it now? He had drawn a fish in the cat sand and then, glancing at the face of the

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Space Lord, had casually brushed it over. Later he had caught the gleam of metal at the man's neck. Could it have been a cross of the God Nailed High? Was there a member of the Old Strong Religion here on Xanadu? If so, he had a subject for blackmail.

Or did he? The man had been trying to communicate to him. Now that he thought of it, he was sure. Well, at least he had a possible colleague. Now all he had to do was remember the man's name.

He gave his mind free association; the face came to him; the man's hand fumbling at the chain at his neck...yes, certainly the cross, he could see it now...why hadn't he noticed it before?... but there it was, recorded on his mind...and, yes, the man's name: Mr. -Stokely-from-Boston. The unlikely suspicion that there was after all, an underperson on Xanadu crossed his mind. Mr.-Stokely-from-Boston did not look as if he were animal-derived, but the name indicated something odd in his background.

Lord Kemal bin Permaiswari felt he could not wait until "morning" to try to further his acquaintance with Mr.-Stokely-from-Boston. What excuse could he have to go down to the cat stables at this hour? The gates of Xanadu were closed for the next eight hours. Then he realized that he had been thinking as an ordinary human being. He was a Lord of the Instrumentality. Why should he have to have an excuse for anything he chose to do? Kuat might be Governor of Xanadu, but in the schema of the Instrumentality he was a very small speck.

Nevertheless, the Space Lord felt it best to be circumspect in his movements. Kuat had demonstrated his ruthlessness, and certain of these "autochthonous" practices seemed very peculiar. A Space Lord who "accidentally" drank pisang while of a disordered mind might be written off. And there was the well-being of Mr.-Stokely-from-Boston to be considered.

Griselda. That was the answer. He had noticed that she was sneezing this afternoon...he had even mentioned it to Madu and Lari...and they had passed if off as dust or pollen. But it would serve as an excuse. He had become so obviously fond of Griselda as to be the subject of teasing of a mild sort on her behalf. Certainly no one would find his concern for her out of the ordinary.

The corridors seemed strangely deserted as he strode through on his way to the cat stable. He realized that he had not ventured from his living area after the final meal of the day since his arrival on Xanadu. Apparently everyone retired after this meal, servants and masters alike. He wondered if the

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stables would also be deserted.

It was his incredible good fortune to find Mr.-Stokely-from-Boston alone. At least, at the time, he assumed that the meeting was fortuitous. Later he questioned the bird-man. Mr.-Stokely-from-Boston had proved to be, as the Space Lord had wildly surmised, an underperson.

Mr. - Stokely - from - Boston's smile was wise and kindly. "You see, Governor Kuat has no suspicion at all that I am an underperson. And, of course, the universal mind barrier has no operative effect on me. It was a little difficult, but I see I did manage to get through to you. I was somewhat worried when my mind probe showed all the leftover scar tissue from Styron IV, but I've been using the latest methods to try healing your mind, and I'm sure we're succeeding very nicely."

The Space Lord felt an odd momentary resentment that this animal-derived person had such an intimate acquaintance with his mind, but the anger was short-lived because he quickly equated the empathy he had built up with Griselda to the mental communication he was having with the bird-man.

Mr. - Stokely - from - Boston smiled even more broadly. "I was quite right about you, Lord bin Permaiswari. You are the ally we have been needing here on Xanadu. You look surprised?"

Lord bin Permaiswari nodded. "The governor was so firm that there were no underpersons on Xanadu —"

"Getting through has not been without its difficulties," Mr.-Stokely-from-Boston acknowledged, "but I am not alone. And we have other human families, of course, but none so powerful as a Space Lord up to now."

Lord Kemal found that he did not resent the assumption that he was an ally. Again the bird-man read his thoughts and smiled at him. He had a curiously winning smile, assured but kindly. He looked trustworthy, and Lord Kemal felt himself ready to accept whatever the bird-man might say.

Their thoughts locked. "Let me introduce myself properly," spieked the bird-man. "My real name is E'duard, and my progenitor was the great E-telekeli, of whom you may have heard."

Lord Kemal found the false modesty of this statement rather touching. He bowed his head momentarily in respect; the legendary bird-man, the E-telekeli, was known throughout the Instrumentality as the acknowledged leader and spiritual advisor of the underpersons. This egg-derived underperson could be a most helpful ally in carrying out the work

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of the Instrumentality or an opposition of fearful proportions. The Lords and Ladies who ruled the Instrumentality were anxious for his cooperation.

Many underpersons were known to have extraordinary medical and psychic powers, and it comforted the Space Lord to know that the animal-derived person who had been manipulating his mind was a descendant of the E-telekeli. He found that he was spieking his thoughts because E'duard could obviously hier them. It would certainly make the process of solving Xanadu's mystery simpler for the Space Lord if they cooperated, but first he wanted to know if their peculiar alliance violated any of the laws of the Instrumentality.

"No," E'duard was emphatic. "In fact, it is a correction of matters which are in direct conflict with the laws of the Instrumentality, with which we have to deal."

"Something 'autochthonous'?" asked the Space Lord shrewdly.

"Native culture is involved," E'duard agreed, "but it's really being used as a screen for something far more evil — and I use the word 'evil' not only in this sense" (he held up the cross of the God Nailed High) "but in its sense of the basic violation of the rights of the living. I mean the right of an entity to exist, to exist on its own terms provided they do not violate the rights of others, to come to its own terms with life, and to make its own decisions."

For a second time Lord Kemal bin Permaiswari nodded in respect and agreement. "These are inalienable rights."

E'duard shook his head. "They *should* be," he spieked, "but on Xanadu, Kuat has found a way around that inalienability. You are, of course, familiar with the diehr-dead?"

"Of course. 'And ne'er a life of their own...'" he quoted from an ancient song. "But what does that have to do with the rights of the living? The diehr-dead are grown from the frozen bits of flesh of remarkable achievers long dead. It's true that in regenerating the physical person of the dead one we have sometimes had extraordinary results with the diehr-dead in their second lives; but sometimes not — their achievements seem to have been a combination of circumstances and genes, not of genes alone...."

Again E'duard shook his head. "It's not of the legal, scientifically controlled diehr-dead I spiek, although I sometimes feel very sorry for them. But what would you think of diehr-dead grown from the living?"

The Space Lord looked his wonder and horror as E'duard

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continued. "Diehr-dead who are controlled like puppets by Kuat, diehr-dead who are substituted for the originals, so that in truth neither the diehr-dead nor the original has a life of its own...."

With quick realization the Space Lord knew what was in the building he had glimpsed in the grove of buah trees. "That's the laboratory, isn't it?"

E'duard nodded. "It's a perfect location. Kuat has spread the rumor that the scent of the buah tree is deadly except when, after consultation with the aroi, he pronounces it safe to harvest the fruit. So nobody dares approach the laboratory. All nonsense. There is only a very short period, just before harvest, when the scent of the buah fruit is deadly...in other words, just enough truth to the rumor to give it currency. You saw our scout killed this morning —"

Lord Kemal looked uncomprehending. "The unmodified eagle you saw fall from the skies this morning on your ride. He was scouting the laboratory for us. He was shot with a pisang dart. It's things like that which make people believe they must stay away from the grove."

"You could communicate?"

For the first time the Space Lord thought that the smile of the bird-man was a little smug. "Of course." Then his face fell and his eyes became old and sad. "He was a brother of mine; we were hatched in the same nest, but I was chosen for genetic coding as an underperson, and he was not. Our feelings are somewhat different from those of true persons, but we are capable of love and loyalty, and sadness as well...."

Lord Kemal saw again in memory the handsome soaring bird of his morning's ride, and he felt E'duard's sadness. Yes, he could believe in the feelings of the underpersons. E'duard touched his hand with a tentative finger.

"I could tell that you grieved for him without knowing any of the circumstances. It is one of the reasons I willed you to come tonight." There was a quick change in his mood. "We must deal first with the aroi."

"I have heard the word, but I don't know its meaning," the Space Lord acknowledged.

"I'm not surprised. The aroi lead a life of pleasure: they sing, they dance, they entertain and they serve as a kind of priesthood. Both men and women make up the aroi, and they are respected and honored. But there's a singularly ghastly requirement for joining the aroi."

The Space Lord looked his question.

"All living descendants of the current mate of the person joining

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the aroi must be sacrificed. Or the mate must die, and if there is more than one offspring of that union, an equivalent number of other volunteers must also die."

Lord Kemal comprehended. "So that is the reason that Lari's mother drowned herself in the sunless sea — to save her infant son. But why did the old Governor join the aroi?"

"Don't you see? With Kuat as Governor and the old Governor with the aroi, that pair of conspirators wields a power over this planet so absolute —"

"So it was a conspiracy from the beginning."

"Of course. Kuat was the son of the first wife, when the governor was in his first youth. In his old age he wanted to continue the power but with the help of a viceroy, as it were."

"And the diehr-dead in the laboratory?"

"That is the reason that the matter is urgent. They are full-grown and almost sentient. They must be destroyed before they are substituted for the originals and the originals killed."

"I suppose there is no other way, but it seems almost like murder."

E'duard disagreed. "The substitution is both physical and spiritual murder. These diehr-dead are like robots without soul —" He saw the Space Lord's faint smile. "— I know you do not believe in the Old Strong Religion, but I think you know what I mean."

"Yes. They are not, in the sense you mean, living beings. They have no will of their own."

"The aroi are two villages away, about 100 li. After they have performed their entertainment in those villages, they will proceed here. That will be the signal for the harvest of the buah fruit and the substitution of the diehr-dead for their living counterparts. Then there will be no opposition to Kuat on the planet, and he can give his cruelty full reign... and plan for the conquest of other worlds. His brother Lari is one of his planned victims because he fears the boy's popularity with the crowds."

The Space Lord was almost incredulous. "But the two persons he has seemed to be truly fond of are Lari and the girl Madu."

"Nevertheless one of the diehr-dead in the laboratory is a replica of the boy Lari."

"Won't the old Governor, the father, object?"

"Possibly, although the mere fact that he joined the aroi when he knew what the cost would be in human terms argues against his interference."

"And Madu?"

"He will keep her as she is, for the time being, and try to mold her

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to his will. He so little respects individuality that if he cannot, he will obtain some bit of her flesh and eventually she too will be replaced by a diehr-dead. He could be satisfied with a physical replica without caring that the *person* was missing."

The Space Lord felt his tired mind attempting to ingest more than was possible at one time. Immediately E'duard was sympathetic.

"I have kept you too long. You must rest. We will be in touch. And don't worry; Kuat's mind barrier applies to him too; only underpersons and animals are exempt, and we are all in league."

As he made his way back to his living quarters, Lord bin Permaiswari was again aware of the silence, the absence of any human activity anywhere in the palace. He wondered how long it had been since he had left his room to seek Mr.-Stokely-from-Boston in the cat stables. He wished he had remembered to ask E'duard how he had acquired that unlikely name. Immediately he was aware of E'duard's voice spieking in his mind: "It was bestowed upon me for some small service I rendered the Instrumentality on old Manhome." The Space Lord started with surprise. He had forgotten that there were no space barriers to spieking if he left his mind open. He spieked "Thank you," then closed his mind.

## IV

When he awoke from a dream-tormented sleep, the Space Lord felt a weariness which he knew E'duard would have termed a tiredness of the soul. There was no way in which he could communicate with the Instrumentality. The next scheduled spaceship for the spaceport above Xanadu was too far in the future to be of any use in the matter of the illegal diehr-dead. E'duard was right. The substitution must be stopped before it began. But how? He felt it somehow belittling to his position for a Space Lord to have to rely on an underperson; the only consolation was that the underperson involved was a descendant of the great E-telekeli.

As they ate their first meal of the day, Madu seemed subdued; Lari was not present. Lord Kemal, making his voice as pleasant as he could, queried Kuat about the boy.

"He's gone down to Raraku to dance with the aroi," Kuat said. Then, apparently, he realized that the Space Lord would not know the word "aroi." "It's a group of dancers and entertainers we have here on Xanadu," he explained kindly. Kemal felt a coldness about his heart.

He could hardly wait to

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communicate with E'duard. "Lari is missing," he spieked, as soon as he was sure that Kuat would not notice his expression.

"All the diehr-dead are still in place, our scouts report," E'duard spieked back. "We will try to locate him and communicate with you."

But time passed; the only things the underpersons were able to assure Lord Kemal were that Lari was not with the aroi at Raraku and that the diehr-dead replica of him was still in place in the laboratory. He seemed to have vanished from the planet.

Madu had taken Kuat's statement at its face value; she was much quieter now, but she apparently believed that Lari was dancing with the aroi. The Space Lord tried a gentle probing,

"I had gathered from what I heard that the aroi was a closed group which one had to join in order to participate."

"Oh, yes, to participate full," Madu said, "but near harvest time the best dancers are allowed to dance with the aroi whether they are members or not. It will not be so long now. The aroi have moved from Raraku to Poike. Then they will come here. I will be so glad to see Lari again; I always miss him when he goes off to run or to dance."

"He has gone away before to dance?" the Space Lord asked.

"Well, no. Not to dance. To run, but not to dance before. But he is very good. He really hasn't been quite old enough before."

"And do you have other entertainment at the harvest besides the dancing?" the Space Lord asked, still seeking a clue as to the whereabouts of the vanished Lari.

Her smile had some of its old radiance. "Oh, yes. That is when we have the horse racing I told you about. It is Kuat's favorite sport. Only," her face clouded, "this time I'm afraid his horse doesn't have much chance of winning. Gogle has really been raced too long and too hard; his back legs are wearing out. The vet was talking about doing a muscle transplant if they had a suitable donor, but I don't think they've found one."

At the prospect of seeing Lari soon again, however, she seemed happier with some of the joy the Space Lord associated with her. They went for a cat ride, and Lord Kemal felt again the overwhelming sense of wonder and pleasure as he and the cat Griselda became as one being. Their feelings were in such close communication that he did not have to tighten his knees or hiss at her to obey his slightest wish. For the first time in days Lord bin Permaiswari was able to forget about E'duard and the diehr-dead, about his concern for Lari and his

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worry as to whether the Instrumentality would approve his cooperation with the bird-man.

For the first time, also, the Space Lord began to wonder to what extent Madu and Lari were committed to each other. Now that he had Madu to himself, he felt more than ever the strong attraction she held for him. He had never, in all the worlds he had known, felt such an attraction for a woman before. And, such was his honor, he began to feel it all the more imperative to restore Lari safely before he could express his feelings to her. He tried spieking to E'duard.

"Nothing," said the bird-man. "We have found no trace of him. The last time he was seen by one of our people was on the outskirts of the palace, headed in the direction of the stables. That is all."

On the day of the festival before the harvest the Space Lord, using Griselda as a pretext, once more went to the cat stables.

E'duard as Mr.-Stokely-from-Boston was hard at work. He looked gravely at the Space Lord, but his mind remained closed. He did not spiek. Lord bin Permaiswari found himself annoyed. He opened his mind and spieked "Animals!"

E'duard winced slightly but still did not spiek.

The Space Lord, apologetic, spieked, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

This time E'duard spieked back. "Yes, you did. And we are, but why so much contempt? We are each what we are."

"I was annoyed that your mind was closed to me, a Space Lord. You have the right to close your mind to anyone. I apologize."

E'duard accepted the statement graciously. He said, "There was a reason that my mind was closed to you. I was trying to decide how to tell you something. And I needed to know your full feelings about the girl Madu and the boy Lari before I can spiek freely."

Lord bin Permaiswari felt a sense of shame; he had behaved, not as a Space Lord, but as a child. He tried to spiek with complete frankness. "I am truly worried about the boy Lari. As to Madu, you must know that there is a strong attraction, but I must first find out about the boy and see what her feelings are."

E'duard nodded. "You spiek as I hoped you would. We have found Lari. He is crippled for life."

Lord Kemal's intake of air hurt his throat. "What do you mean?"

"Kuat had his vet take the boy's calf muscles and transplant them to his favorite horse, Gogle. The horse will be able to run one more race at top speed, thus fooling all of those who bet against Kuat. It's

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improbable that any surgery will enable the boy to walk again, much less to run or dance."

The Space Lord found his mind a blank. He realized that E'duard was still spieking.

"We will have the boy in his wheelchair at the horse race tomorrow. You will need Madu's help. Then you can decide what to do."

Until the time of the race next day Lord Kemal found himself moving as if in a dream, dispassionately observing his movements. E'duard spieked to him only once. "We must kill off the diehr-dead at once," he said. "After the race tomorrow, when everybody is celebrating will be the time. Keep Kuat busy and I will take care of the matter."

Fearful, unhappy, feeling weaker than he had since Styron IV, Lord Kemal bin Permaiswari accompanied Madu and Governor Kuat to the horse race. At their box sat Lari, white-faced, thin, much older, in a wheelchair. "Why?" spiek-shrieked the Space Lord.

E'duard's voice came through much more calmly. "Kuat actually thought he was being kind. With the boy crippled, he can't be the racer-hero he has been to the people of Xanadu. Kuat thought that that way he wouldn't need to substitute the diehr-dead. He didn't realize he's taken away the boy's chief reason for wanting to live; he might almost as well have substituted the diehr-dead."

Madu was sobbing. Kuat, in what he intended as a rough kindness, stroked her hair. "We'll take care of him. And, Venus! Will we fool the bettors today! They think Gogle can't run anymore. Will they be fooled! Of course, it's only for this one race, but it'll be worth it!"

"Be worth it," the Space Lord thought. Be worth the rest of Lari's life, spent crippled, unable to do what he loved most.

"Be worth it," Madu thought. Never to dance again, never to run, to feel the wind in his hair as the crowds cheered.

"Be worth it," Lari thought. What does anything matter anymore.

Gogle won by half a track.

Kuat, his mood expansive, said to the others, "See you in the main salon of the palace. Have to collect my wagers."

Madu's face was carved of marble as she wheeled Lari toward a special two-cat cart brought up beside the stadium. Lord Kemal, without a word, mounted Griselda. He felt the need, for a little while, at least, for solitude.

They loped, in silent comunication, away from the walls of the city. Lord Kemal heard a cry from the city gate, but he paid no

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attention. His mind was on Lari. Again the cry. Another lope. Suddenly Griselda faltered, stumbled, fell. At once the Space Lord was down, beside her face. Her eyes were glazing. He saw, then, the dart piercing her neck. Pisang. She tried to lick his hand; he petted her, his eyes filled with tears. She gave one great wretching sigh, looked into his being, shuddered and died. Part of him died with her.

When he reached the gate he queried the guard. No one was supposed to leave the city between the end of the races and the harvesting of the buah fruit. Griselda was the victim of an error of administrative oversight. No one had remembered to tell the Space Lord.

Silently he walked back through the pathways of the city. How beautiful it had seemed to him a short while ago. How empty and how sad it seemed now.

He reached the main salon shortly after Madu and Lari in his wheelchair arrived.

It was strange how all the budding desire for Madu had withered like a flower in the frost.

Kuat entered, laughing.

Lord Kemal would be tortured for more than two centuries by a question. When did the ends justify the means? When was the law absolute? He saw in his mind's eye Griselda bounding over dunes and plains — a Madu innocent as dawn — Lari dancing under a sunless moon.

"Dju-di!" demanded Kuat.

Madu moved gracefully toward the low table. She picked up the two-holed pitcher. Lord Kemal saw, through E'duard's spiech, that the pisang flow was being let into the ambiotic fluid of the diehr-dead. Soon they would be truly dead.

Kuat laughed. "I won every bet I made today."

He looked away from Madu toward the Lord Kemal.

Almost imperceptibly Madu's thumb moved from one hole to the other.

Lord Kemal did nothing in the endless night.

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**The Pearcey boy came to the Morton boarding house in November 1928, and with his strange behavior and hideous dreams, provided a brief but unpleasant episode in the lives of the other boarders.**

# The Pearcey Boy

## by R. BRETNOR

As thin Mrs. Morton and her even thinner sister said afterwards, wasn't it lucky for Aimee Pearcey that Dr. Wassall was still alive in November, 1928, when she moved into the Morton boarding house with that awful boy of hers — for otherwise you couldn't tell what might've happened, the boy being *defective* like that and simply sapping what little strength she had. Her devotion to him, Mrs. Morton said, would have sent her into a nervous breakdown at least, if not into an early grave, if Captain Henriks hadn't taken such a firm stand. And everybody in the house finally agreed with her, everybody except Edna Owen; and, really, as Edna later told herself between her tears, there had been nothing, *nothing* she could do about it.

Widowed some months before, Aimee Pearcey had moved to San Diego from Los Angeles (or, as she said, from Hollywood, where she had almost been a child star); and Mrs. Morton had broken the ironclad rule she herself had made against taking in anybody with a child, because Aimee was such an appealing little thing, with her small flat breasts and pretty legs, her bangs and eye shadow, and that tiny voice of hers, like a little girl's. Besides, it was obvious that Pearcey had left her all the money she could need; you could see it in her clothes and her two diamond rings, and she drove an almost new Stearns-Knight sedan, the expensive kind.

That first evening she had come down alone to supper. Her Milton, she explained, had a sick headache; she sighed — he was always having them; so she had given him a warm glass of milk and tucked him in. It was then that Mrs. Morton had introduced her to everybody there: old Mrs. Tolley and Miss Loben-



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stein, who shared two rooms and bath on the third floor front, and Mr. Keyhoe the stock salesman, and the young Robinsons, who were just married and were house hunting, and the Hoagies, Jim and Evie Ann, and the doctor, who had an apartment down the street but took all his meals with them. But Captain Henriks, Captain Myron Henriks, Hank Henriks, had not been introduced. He had not needed to. As soon as Mrs. Pearcey came in, Edna Owen had seen that look, once so familiar, in his eyes; and he had risen, smiling the same smile except that it was much, much more intense; and she had sat there, gaze fixed on her own beautifully manicured secretary's hands, while he held Aimee Pearcey's chair, during the few moments it took for them to know each other.

The conversation, small and general, was dominated by the captain's voice, his laughter, their laughter and approval of what he had to say. Edna Owen allowed its currents to circulate around her; she did not look up, but her mind saw Hank Henriks as she had seen him first: the strong square jaw, the deep tan with what she had taken to be a malarial pallor underlying it, the rude brown eyes protruding exophthalmically. She was thirty-two, twice engaged but somehow never married, still unresigned to spinsterhood. She had listened to his stories of the War, of service in Nicaragua, the Philippines, the China Station; she had gone out with him, to the service clubs which, as a retired officer, he frequented; to the Hotel del Coronado, to Tijuana; she had observed him, at first with her heart hammering, then tenderly and with concern, finally with cold apprehension. His deep drinking, even heavier gambling, rancid ill-temper when he lost, and — when he was most engaging and most amiable — his probing questions regarding her finances, especially when he had overspent his pension, as he always did, or lost another of his many jobs. Ultimately, torn within herself, she had told her troubles to an old friend whom she seldom saw, married to a Marine sergeant major named Marrich and living in Pacific Beach; they had invited her to dinner, and afterwards Bill Marrich, ribboned almost to his shoulder strap and hard as nails, had broken it to her as gently as he could. "Look, Eddie," he had said, "maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but it's for your good. Remember, it's scuttlebutt. It stays with you, and you don't let it out. Okay?"

She had given him her promise.

"All right. We been together lots of places, Hank and me — Chateau-Thierry and the Islands and God-knows-what. He was tops,

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Eddie, tough and smart and he earned everything he got — his commission and that sweet wife of his and the two kids. Then something hit him, like it often does. In Shanghai, with the wife at home — you understand? The word is there was this Russian woman — China was full of 'em after the Revolution, making a livin' only way they could. Anyhow, he set her up in an apartment — Christ! with black silk sheets. It was for a few months only — his tour was almost over — but she gave him something to bring back with him, and he came back and gave it to his wife."

Edna looked at him. "What was it?" she had asked.

"A dose."

"I — I don't understand."

"Syph," Bill Marrich said, and his wife echoed him, saying the word in full.

"She left him, took the kids. Maybe the medics cured him and maybe not; anyhow they washed him out. Sometimes it does things to the brain, and maybe that's why he went off the broken end the way he did — fights and long drunks and what all, even while he was still in the Corps. Anyway, Eddie, if you got any sense you'll leave him be. For my money, one of these days he's going to split his seams from stem to stern."

She thanked them and went home and wept, partly in genuine distress but mostly with relief, like a traveler who unknowingly has walked the thin edge of a crumbling cliff; and she chilled Captain Henriks with all the skill she had acquired in her years as confidential secretary to men of property and power, until he, at first puzzled and annoyed, settled down to treating her with a thinly veiled, carefully polite contempt.

During dinner, she looked at him no more than courtesy required and scarcely spoke, trying to think only of the stiff portraits on the walls, of the people who had built the house so many years ago, and of the heavy furniture they and their heirs, dying, had left behind.

The dinner dragged interminably; and she was halfway through dessert, thankful that soon she would escape, when abruptly the boy burst into the room. He was enormous for his age. Nine or perhaps ten, he was big enough to be thirteen, soft and fat and pale, with pale hair and lusterless blue eyes. He wore rumpled flannelette pajames. His feet were bare. His doughy cheeks were wet with tears. Obviously, fear held him in its grip.

"*Mil*-ton!" cried Mrs. Pearcey, starting to rise; and at once, frantically, he dashed around the table's end and clung to her like a terror-stricken three-year-old, calling out "Mama! Mama!" and

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babbling at her incoherently.

Embarrassed, she glanced nervously around, pleading with her eyes while her hands soothed the boy, while she cooed baby talk to him. He quieted, still clinging to her. "I — I'm so sorry, Mrs. Morton," she almost whispered. "Milton — Milton's been having another of — of his dreams. He doesn't have them very often —" Now she was murmuring half to him, half to the others there. "— does he, dear? And now we'll take him back upstairs, and give him some more milk, and tuck him back in bed, and everything'll be all right again."

She stood. He clung to her. Cooing to him, she led him from the room, her shadowed eyes sending back their last appeal as she went through the door.

For seconds, there was silence. Only their eyes spoke their opinions and their comments: their sympathy for little Aimee Pearcey, their instant detestation of her boy. Edna Owen felt the surge of their hostility, and because of it her heart went out to him; and yet — she was compelled to admit it to herself — he was a thoroughly repulsive child, the sort of large, soft boy whom feisty smaller boys tease, taunt, and persecute, whom teachers try to tolerate while struggling to suppress their own antagonism, who are loved only by their mothers — and often not by them.

The silence strained to its breaking point.

"*Ima*gine!" exclaimed old Mrs. Tolley. "As young as her, and having your whole life tied down to —" She turned to Mrs. Morton. "Do you think he's *normal?*" she demanded shrilly. "Do you think it's safe to have him in the house?"

"I'm sure she'd never have him with her if he weren't, well, at least *harmless.*" Mrs. Morton pursed her lips. "After *all,* it's not as if she came here without references. He's just the burden that she has to bear, is all." She looked around, for confirmation, for support. Her sister nodded like a pecking bird.

Across from Edna, Dr. Wassall cleared his throat. Everyone looked at him, a great, loose, looming figure of a man, his suit, his broken-down wing collar, and his skin all showing signs of a vast obesity, now largely lost. "*Professionally* —" he said. He paused momentarily. "— and though I am retired, I think that I may speak professionally —"

*His voice sounds just the way patchouli smells,* thought Edna Owen. *There is something dead and rotten under all the goo.*

"— and it is my opinion, though like you I have seen the lad only once, it is my opinion that he is definitely *defective.*" His head inclined graciously toward Mrs.

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Morton. "But I agree with you, dear lady, that he is probably quite harmless, except perhaps to those who have to care for him, of course. These are the little tragedies medical practice often reveals to us. Such children should not be inflicted on the world. They are much happier in in-sti-tu-tions —" He separated the word into its segments, rolling them on his tongue. "— with others of their kind. Young Mrs. Pearcey undoubtedly feels guilty for having brought the boy into the world at all, and foolishly she pities him."

"Foolishly?" exclaimed Edna Owen. "Dr. Wassall, she's his *mother*. Besides, it's not his fault — he's just a child!"

The doctor smiled at her benignly. He removed his small gold-rimmed spectacles and polished them. "I can assure you," he said, "that these parental sacrifices are almost always wasted and that the pity which inspires them is totally unjustified. The innocence of childhood is a pretty fallacy, but it is false nonetheless. Many of these children — perhaps most of them — are themselves directly responsible for their con-di-tion. May I say that the boy we have just seen is almost certainly a case in point."

"Well, I just don't believe it!" Evie Ann Hoagie snapped. "Jim and me raised four kids, and I don't see how one that age could do that to himself." Mrs. Morton's sister pecked her agreement silently.

Doctor Wassall folded his napkin, rolled it, replaced it in its ring. Rheumatically, he rose. "This, I'm afraid, is not the time to explain it to you," he declared. "It would be scarcely ethical for me to do so, for of course there is a bare possibility that I am wrong. But let me leave you with this thought — seeds of corruption do not need old soil in which to grow."

He said goodnight and, shaking his head solemnly, left the room.

"I *still* think he's wrong," said Evie Ann. "But anyhow — believe me! — I'm sure glad Jim and I aren't saddled with that kid."

"It — it'd be simply *awful!*" whispered Doris Robinson, looking at her new husband and thinking of the children they would have.

Edna said nothing. She looked at Captain Henriks and saw him sitting there staring at his hands. His eyes were hooded, and he was smiling with his lips, a private smile, cold, calculating, mirthless. Again she felt a chill of apprehension. Again the feeling of their raw antagonism swept over her. Then there was the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and Henriks looked up quickly and shushed them, and Mrs. Morton discreetly held a finger to her lips.

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Aimee Pearcey came in, upset, uncertain of herself. Apologizing, she took her seat again; and Edna saw that, for a moment only, Hank Henriks placed his hand over hers, gently, but firmly enough so that there could be no mistake about its weight and strength and promise of protection.

When, as they usually did, they followed Mrs. Morton into the parlor to listen to KFSD on her big Fada radio, Edna did not join them, even though Mr. Hoover, the President-elect, was going to make a speech. Instead, she went upstairs and, still thinking of Milton in his bed, forced herself to write letters she did not want to write.

During the ensuing weeks, Aimee Pearcey's fellow boarders learned a great deal about her and her son. As Mrs. Tolley told Miss Lobenstein, the poor little creature wore her heart right there on her sleeve — and no wonder, left all alone in the world like that! Anyone could see she was just starved for somebody to take an interest in her, for a kind word. And with that poor dreadful boy.

They learned that Leonard Pearcey had been much older than his wife, a wholesale hardware man; that he had started to get peculiar just before he died; that, though luckily the insurance company couldn't prove a thing, the policemen summoned to the scene thought it was not an accident but suicide. They learned that Leonard's relatives resented her, and that was why she had moved down to San Diego; that somehow Milton never got along in school, but she was sure he'd do better if she just picked one carefully; that someday she hoped to buy a little house all for her very own, but right now the thought of housekeeping was more than she could bear. They also learned that Leonard's legacy had consisted of an almost unbelievable amount in leading stocks, like Transamerica, and that because he had been such a clever businessman she had used the insurance money to add to them — which Mr. Keyhoe said had been real sharp of her. She told them all her story, but it was to Hank Henriks that she was most closely drawn, even though at first she didn't let him take her out, pleading that she couldn't leave Milton all alone, that he needed her.

Milton himself was, to put it brutally, disgusting. When spoken to, he either sulked or sniveled. He could not seem to learn to wash himself. He wet his bed. At table, he messed his food around, smearing it on the cloth, dropping it on the floor. He broke things: records for Mrs. Morton's precious phonograph, teacups, even her

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French bronze metal clock on which a tiny blacksmith wielded his bronze sledge to strike the hours; and though his mother paid for everything, each new episode darkened the cloud of animosity in which he lived. Two or three times, he flushed unlikely objects down the toilet, clogging it at the most inconvenient hours. He spent his time mysteriously, sometimes in the garden staring at Mrs. Morton's goldfish by the hour, sometimes in strange places like the attic, where the maid had found him watching spiders. And his inevitable encounters with other children in the neighborhood always were disastrous, leaving him bruised spiritually and physically and Mrs. Pearcey generally in tears.

Then gradually, as the weeks went by, his role in the day-to-day drama of the house began to change. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the psychic unbilical cord that bound his mother to him started to atrophy; less and less of her time was spent with him, and more and more with Captain Henriks. At first, it was simply a matter of stealing an hour or two for lunch, or for a visit to the zoo in Balboa Park. But the luncheon hours grew longer; after the zoo, there were drives in the Stearns-Knight, with the captain now always at the wheel, and clubs to go to, comrades in arms and old friends to visit. Mrs. Morton and her sister found themselves hysterically trying to keep an eye on Milton, without much success, and their protests resulted in Aimee Pearcey hiring a succession of limp, raggle-taggle women who were supposed to watch him while she was away, especially in the evenings. They came, and fretted over his untidy dinners, and did their sad best to shepherd him to bed and keep him there; and always they called for help when he had nightmares or wet himself. Each lasted a few days — how few depended on her need for money — and then gave up; and after each one left, there would be a brief period when Mrs. Pearcey resumed her tasks, aided by all the paternal authority Hank Henriks could exert. Edna, watching them, tormented by her own understanding of his character and what Bill Marrish had told her of his past, still had to admire the patience with which he tried — or appeared to try — to assume a father's role. But his attempts were fruitless; Milton, obviously fearing and resenting him, became more and more refractory, until another weary woman would be hired and the whole cycle would begin again. Increasingly, everyone in the house started to agree with Dr. Wassall's now frequently repeated judgment: that the boy was irremediably defective and that he's be better off

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in some sort of institution. Even the Hoagies and Mrs. Morton's sister, who from the beginning had pitied and defended him, were becoming alienated; and even Edna Owen found herself wishing that somehow, quietly and kindly, he could be spirited away. When she wished it, shame would force her to suppress the wish, adding to the burden of her apprehension.

Actually, the focal point of their annoyance, the symbol of Milton's insistent nuisance value, was something unimportant in itself. Mrs. Morton had counted on the Robinsons finding themselves a house, and she had promised Aimee Pearcey their room, with its sleeping porch and private bathroom. But time went by, and everything they found either required too much of a down payment or needed fixing or was too far away from where he worked; and, as they said, they didn't want to go and rent just to pack up and move again as soon as they got settled. So Milton and his mother had to keep on sharing the second-floor bath and toilet with Edna and the Hoagies and Mr. Keyhoe. There was no trouble about the bathroom, which was separate, but — as Jim Hoagie grumbled to his wife — for Christ's sake, every time you had to use the can, that goddamn kid was there with the door locked; and if you gave him hell, like as not he'd piss all over everything and leave it for you. He wasn't in there often in the morning, when Edna and Mr. Keyhoe had to get to work, but otherwise he seemed to time his visits with a calculated malevolence, especially where the Hoagies were concerned, almost as if he wanted them to turn against him.

Aimee Pearcey now was almost constantly with Captain Henriks, and Milton was becoming more and more unmanageable, at night especially, when she was away. His nightmares, much more frequent now, were things of horror, seizing him, holding him in their grip sometimes even after he was out of bed and, having escaped from whoever had been taking care of him, was running wild-eyed down the hall. Edna, on the same floor, had wakened twice to hear his cries, his weeping, his incoherent pleading with the faceless apparitions in his mind; and when she heard later that his mother, at Captain Henrik's urging, had consulted Dr. Wassall and that the doctor was going to prescribe sedatives for him, she felt only a momentary foreboding twinge.

For a while, then, Milton had slept more soundly, not even waking when his bed was wet. He moaned sometimes in his sleep, but his nightmares, if they tormented him, were powerless to part the

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heavy curtain his nightly medication had imposed. Once, the druggist who owned the store at Fifth and Laurel mentioned it very tactfully to Edna; he said that sure was potent stuff the old man was giving Mrs. Pearcey and waited with a little worried frown for her reply; and she, remarking hesitantly that, after all, the doctor had had years of experience and no doubt knew what he was doing, said nothing about whom the prescriptions were really for. She had gone home troubled by conscience, and later on she tried to talk about it to Hank Henriks, asking him whether he thought sedatives every night might not be bad for so young a child.

Instantly, rage towered within him, burning in his protruding eyes, twisting his mouth, tensing the powerful tendons of his hands; and almost instantly it vanished, smothered by a visible effort of his will, to be replaced by his cold, secret smile under his once-again-hooded eyes. But his voice, when he spoke to her, betrayed that it was still alive.

*"Mind your damn business,"* he told her in a terrible monotone. *"Milton's not your brat. He's Aimee's boy. Before long he'll be mine. He needs no part of you — who the hell does, for Christ's sake? Damn you, stay out of this."*

And turning on his heel, he had walked off, leaving her shaken and afraid, and shamefully aware that she would take no action, that whatever destiny awaited Aimee Pearcey and her son, she would be powerless to interfere.

The knowledge of her half-voluntary helplessness gnawed at Edna during the next few days. She began to hate Hank Henriks, especially when she saw that cruelty was entering actively into his relationship with Milton: fingers suddenly seizing into arm muscles when only an admonishment was called for; the red traces of a slap across the face brought into high relief by blubbering tears as the boy was dragged upstairs for some miserable mistake or escapade. And the fact that Aimee Pearcey now seemed oblivious to it all only made it more difficult to understand and tolerate.

She went again to see the Marrichs and told them the whole story. Both of them patiently gave her the same advice Bill had given her when she first asked them about Hank — *Lay off.* They agreed with her: Mrs. Pearcey was letting herself in for a bucketful of trouble; it could be real tough on the kid, even if he did sound like something from under a flat rock; it was too bad, but what did she propose to do about it — got to the D.A.? Betty Marrich, who had worked for lawyers, said that with a

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short, brittle laugh; and Edna, who had also worked for some of them, suddenly saw the complete futility of even thinking about doing anything. In her mind's eye, she saw herself registering a complaint — and the expressions on the faces of whatever authorities she spoke to when, questioned, she admitted that, yes, she had for a time — for quite some time, in fact — gone with Captain Henriks. She drove her small Dodge coupe slowly home, feeling drained and, for no reason she could fathom, strangely deserted.

The night was cold and wretched, wet with a persistent foggy drizzle, and it followed her into the house, upstairs into her room. Trying to think of other things, she undressed, washed her face and hands at the wash basin behind the Chinese screen, put on a bed jacket over her nightgown, and got in between the chill sheets. For half an hour or so, she tried to read a mystery novel; then, giving up, she turned out the light and concentrated on the discipline of programming her next day's work, now waiting on her desk. After a while, she dropped off to sleep.

Milton's screams wakened her at about one o'clock; instantly alert, she felt cold hands of terror seize her, as though a driven phantom had invaded her out of the weeping night. Then she realized that the screams were Milton's and that whatever fear beset him it was of no present menace. His screaming was more a keening, a shrill, infantile ululation broken by incoherent words, choked sobs, hysterical small calls and pleadings.

It took her only a second to remember that Mrs. Pearcey and the captain had gone out partying and that nothing in the world could wake up Mr. Keyhoe once he fell asleep. She slipped into her bathrobe and her slippers and went out into the hall. Only a nightlight shone there, a faint mist around it, and it was very cold.

Milton stood alone in the very middle of the hall, and the light showed her his wide-open, pallid eyes, staring at another world in which he and his horror were utterly alone. Tears flowed down his cheeks into his open mouth. He did not see her as she came to him. His frantic noise continued, throwing off shreds of words which she could barely catch: *n-n-n-NO!* and *d-d-don'* — and something hideous about hands and *eyes.*

"Milton!" she cried out. "Wake *up,* child! You're dreaming, *dreaming!* It's not *real!*"

He did not see her. He did not understand. But for an instant his screaming was cut off. Then *"Mama, mama!"* he shrieked crazily and ran to her, keening

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again and clinging tightly to her.

Edna, realizing that his pajama pants were soaked, tried to push him from her, but when she did his voice rose a full octave and he held to her frantically. She quelled her fear and her disgust, and tried to soothe him. Briefly, he became almost intelligible, but his words were vagrant rags and tatters, and later, when she tried to remember exactly what he'd said, she could not recall their sequence or how they had succeeded in transferring his nightmare to her mind. But the picture of it, in all its horrible clarity, was there. Hank Henriks was killing Aimee Pearcey. His hands were round her throat. His protruding eyes were staring down at her as though they, in their hatred, could do something to complete her death. And he was killing her because her money was all gone.

The picture formed. Despite the welter of mad sound, the torturing emotions, the soggy smell of urine in the cold air, it formed convincingly; and Edna Owen was overcome by pity for the now-sobbing, quivering boy. Despite his wetness, she held him close against her, and stroked his head, and murmured nonsense to him, telling him not to be afraid, and that no one was going to hurt his mama; and so he quieted as his waking-up began. By the time the Hoagies reached them, he was weeping softly and saying nothing more.

Edna told them what had happened: that he had had a nightmare in which somebody was trying to do something to his mother. But she thought it wiser to say nothing about who that someone was. Bravely, the Hoagies swallowed their revulsion and annoyance. Jim reckoned that maybe Aimee had forgotten to give the kid his pills; Evie Ann said that, with all their own grown up and married, she hadn't thought she'd have to get up in the middle of the night and dry off a wet crybaby ever again. They took charge of Milton, leading him to the toilet, where, almost choking over his sobs, he vomited, then back to his room, where Evie Ann did her best to clean him up, stripping off the wet sheets, mopping the rubber one under them, making the bed again with one fresh sheet and the blankets, and giving him a pair of shorts to put on instead of his pajama pants. She found the pills Mrs. Pearcey had forgotten and gave him one of them.

"There!" she said. "That ought to settle him till morning."

"I hope to God!" her husband grunted, closing the door behind him.

In her own room again, Edna washed herself very carefully and went back to bed, Milton's

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nightmare still haunting her; and next day Mrs. Pearcey thanked her and the Hoagies effusively for taking care of Milton the way they had and promised that she never, *never* would forget his pills again.

And Edna wondered how long it could go on.

It went on for three weeks, until the end of March; and then one evening after supper, when they had been invited into the parlor to hear the news, Mrs. Morton's sister unwittingly hastened its perhaps-predestined end. They were all there except the Hoagies, who had gone to a new Pola Negri picture down at the Superba, and Mr. Keyhoe, who was away, and Mrs. Pearcey and the captain, who were out as usual. They were just sitting talking, waiting for the news program to begin, when she came in. She did not enter in her usual self-effacing way, with a dryly apologetic little cough and a rustle of her ancient dress over her thin bones. She almost ran into the room, saw them, tried to control herself, stood there with her small, wrinkled hands working at each other, a tic pulling at the corner of her nervous mouth.

"Whatever's *wrong* with you?" demanded Mrs. Morton. "What's *happened?*"

Her sister's mouth worked, but the words would not come. Then, astoundingly, a blush suffused the gray pallor of her face, changing it to a blotched and faded pink. She tried to speak and finally found a portion of her voice. "It — it's that Pearcey boy!" she whispered, and the blush came and went and came again. "He — h-h-he —"

Mrs. Morton was about to ask what he had broken now, but Dr. Wassall spoke before her. He had lumbered to his feet and now was offering his own chair to the scarecrow figure standing there.

"Compose yourself, dear lady," he urged, his voice thick with treacle. "I'm sure your sister will procure you a small restorative — perhaps a cup of tea. But first you must sit down and try to tell us what the boy has done —"

She sat, her hands still wrestling with each other in her lap.

"— and you can rest assured —" The doctor took off his narrow spectacles and smiled at her. "— that no matter what it was, we shall not be surprised. No, indeed. You will recall what I've been saying ever since his mother brought him here."

Mrs. Tolley and Miss Lobenstein nodded emphatically, and Mrs. Tolley patted Mrs. Morton's sister on the knee. "Do try and tell us, dear," she urged. *"We'll* understand."

"I — I was go — going to the toilet —" Mrs. Morton's sister whispered.

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"We *all* do," giggled Doris Robinson foolishly, and even her husband frowned at her.

"— the — the toilet on the second floor. I pulled the door open, and — and *he* was there." In her anguish, the blush ebbed and flowed. "He s-s-saw me. He saw me, but he didn't even *stop.*"

"My goodness!" gasped Miss Lobenstein. "What was he *doing?*"

Mrs. Morton's sister brought up her writhing hands to shield her face. Her voice, abruptly a hoarse croak, came from behind them. "He — oh, I don't know how to say it! — he — he was — *he was playing with himself!*"

"Well, I *never!*" cried old Mrs. Tolley, horrified.

Then there was total silence, broken only by the asthmatic gust of the doctor's breath being released. He leaned forward, looming over them. "That is what I sus-pec-ted from the first," he told them. "Some people nowadays decry the seriousness of self-abuse, but they are tragically mistaken. When I first saw the boy, I recognized the symptoms — the perverse behavior, the ob-vi-ous-ly damaged brain and nervous system — all unmistakable. But of course I could say nothing then. It would have been un-ethi-cal." Sighing heavily, he sat down on the sofa.

"Isn't the kid a little young for that?" asked Robinson.

"It is the *early* formation of the habit that is most dan-ger-ous," declared the doctor. He cited two or three books by men he said were the outstanding authorities; and, though later Robinson told his wife that, hell, every kid pulled his peter sometime or other and the old man was full of prunes, nobody offered any argument. Edna Owen, disliking him, still stayed silent — the episode fitted too neatly into the whole picture of Milton's wretchedness.

Dr. Wassall went on talking. He discussed other cases, each more distressing than the last, and he told Mrs. Morton's sister that, when she had recovered from her shock, he wanted to ask her some professional questions about what she'd seen.

She blushed even more furiously, tittered at him hysterically, and covered her face again; and Mrs. Morton left the room and brought her back a cordial.

"*Well,*" she said, when she had resumed her seat, "Doctor Wassall, something must be done about that boy."

"It must," the doctor said, "and I can promise you, Mrs. Morton, that it *shall.* I'm sure that Captain Henriks understands the problem, and I shall see that this new evidence is shown to him in its correct perspective. No marriage could succeed with that lad in the

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house. Happily I have a friend who is an a-lien-ist — he was the head of an asylum for several years — and I'm sure he will concur in my diagnosis and recommend that the boy be put away."

"Put away where?" asked Edna.

"In an appropriate in-sti-tu-tion," replied the doctor, "where he will be completely cared for and strictly disciplined and where he will be among other children as defective as himself. That, my dear, is the only answer, and I am sure that Mrs. Pearcey, despite her perhaps very natural maternal instinct, will realize it too." He beamed at them and rose to take his leave, the news program forgotten. "I shall telephone my friend tomorrow," he promised. "*Good* night."

The rest of Milton's story Edna Owen heard only at secondhand, for in the morning she had to take a week's leave from her job to care for a suddenly sick uncle in Escondido, and while she was there she ran into a one-time boy friend of whom she had been very fond, now widowed and with a pretty little girl. Long before the week was up, she began to realize that his new interest in her was really serious and found that his maturity had only deepened her affection for him. Besides, she realized, in him she found a refuge. She put off leaving after her uncle had recovered, first to ten days, then the full two weeks; and when finally she returned to San Diego, she was engaged.

Everyone at Mrs. Morton's congratulated her, and Mrs. Tolley kissed her on the cheek and told her how very *nice* it was, and lucky too, that she'd been able to find a good man at her age. Then they told her what had become of Milton and his mother and Captain Henriks, and she was surprised to realize that she had actually forgotten all about them.

The alienist, a Dr. Gullard, had been called in after Mrs. Pearcey had put up a ritual protest. He was rawboned, tall, and bald, not much younger than Dr. Wassall but much more active and much more intense. He had impressed the Hoagies as having a veneer of human warmth over an ice-cold core — like a used-car salesman, Jim Hoagie said. At any rate, somehow he had won Milton's confidence, talking to him two or three times in the garden; and when he presented his report, it agreed in every detail with his colleague's. He also recommended an institution which would accept the boy — a private one, expensive, but worth it because they'd tolerate no nonsense. The arrangements had taken only a few days, and

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Milton had departed docilely, holding to Dr. Gullard's hand and carrying a bedraggled yellow rabbit with glass eyes. A stocky, frowning woman followed them, loaded with his small suitcase and a cardboard carton full of clothes. From the car he had waved back to his mother, saying that he and the nice doctor were going to play games just for a day and then he'd be back with her.

A few days later, she and Hank Henriks had been married in Agua Caliente, across the border, and they had left immediately on their honeymoon, a leisurely spring drive in the Stearns-Knight across the country to Pensacola, where they planned to settle.

Edna was shocked at their betrayal of Milton, and she wept briefly in her room when she thought of its callousness and of the cruelty of his realization. But because her own heart was singing, she dried her tears and allowed her own future to dominate her thoughts. She had decided to keep on working until May Day, so that her employers could replace her promptly, and then she and her George would be married on the Sunday following.

The night before, when she was all packed and radiant, Mrs. Morton had a special cake for her and served some wine she said she had had put away since before Prohibition, and afterwards they all went out into the parlor, and Mrs. Morton, giggling girlishly, had put the wedding march from *Lohengrin* on the phonograph.

"I'm so happy for you, Edna dear," she said when it was over, "and I do hope that you've enjoyed it here. It's a shame you had to put up with that poor Pearcey boy, like all of us, but I just know it all turned out for the best."

"I wish I could believe that." Edna sighed. "But he was *really* pitiful — those hideous nightmares he had! Do you know what he'd been dreaming that night when Jim and Evie Ann and I took care of him? He'd dreamed Hank Henriks was murdering Aimee, his hands around her throat, and those eyes of his —" She shuddered. "He was killing her because she'd lost all her money."

There were murmurs of *how dreadful* and *what a terrible dream,* and Mrs. Tolley said he must have been *deranged* even to think of such a thing.

The doctor cleared his throat. "Miss Owen," he said in his most unctuous voice, "please do not concern yourself about that boy. Mrs. Tolley is quite right. He is not sane. Those dreams of his show that he has lost all contact with re-al-ity."

"He sure has where losing all her money is concerned!" laughed Mr. Keyhoe. "With her stocks, it's

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like she owned the U.S. Mint. There's nothing safer. Believe me, I'm in the business — I *know*."

"No, there's no need to worry on that score." Dr. Wassall chuckled. "Certainly not with Hoover in the White House. But some of the boy's dreams were really much, much worse. Dr. Gullard is extremely competent, and he found out all about them. They showed only too clearly how the lad has damaged his own immature brain. There was one especially. He said it lasted a long time, and he was in a terrible place where men in uniform were pushing people into ovens and killing them — thousands and thousands of them — men and women and even tiny children. He started screaming when he talked about it." The doctor paused. "What normal person even could imagine anything like that happening in a civilized world?"

And he smiled at them.

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# Collector's Items

**FOUR SPECIAL ONE AUTHOR ISSUES OF F&SF**

**• Special Poul Anderson Issue (April 1971): Features the award-winning novella by Poul Anderson, "The Queen of Air and Darkness." Also: Profile by Gordon R. Dickson, critical appreciation by James Blish and bibliography. Cover by Kelly Freas. $1.00**

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## THE ULTIMATE QUEST

We all have dreams of our favorite literary works (or, more generally, literary evocations) being translated into visual terms by filmmakers. I think this is half laziness — books make us visualize for ourselves — and half wishful thinking (literally and figuratively); I commented last month that I felt that film and science fiction were simply not compatible at our immediate level of the film art.

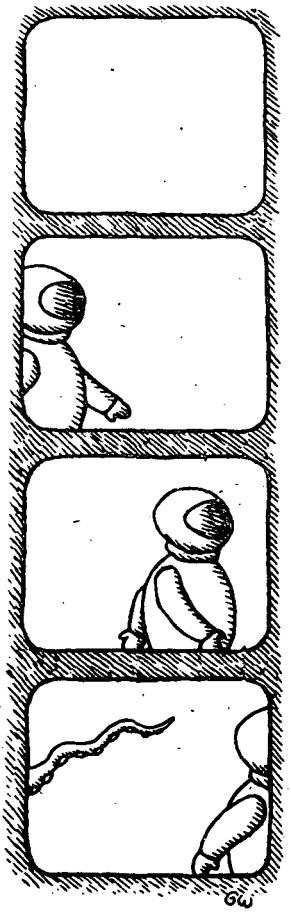
But what about fantasy? There are no worlds to build; maybe some gorgeously semi-barbaric kingdoms on the s&s end of it, but generally fantasy presents a simpler visual concept. Even in the Lord of the Rings, the only major production problem would be Gondor (Mordor would be downright simple; just film along the Jersey Turnpike. I'm not being facetious; read JRRT's description again).

I just saw a film with the following images that captured more truly my epic fantasy visualizations than any other I'd ever encountered. Try these on your own wishful thinking.

Amid a host of desolate mountains, a small band of armored knights faces a rocky tor, upon which stands a sorcerer, black cloaked and helmeted in

## BAIRD SEARLES

# Films



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ram's horns. He gestures with his staff; thunderbolts explode amidst the tumbled rocks.

Two knights gallop through a thick green wood; the few shafts of sunlight that pierce the dense foliage illuminate their shining mail and parti-colored overtunics. It is a direct copy in motion of the illustrations from "The Boy's King Arthur" (who did them? Wyeth? Pyle? My Crayola'd copy went somewhere with my teddy bear).

A misty wood; the fog swirls heavily around the path. There are brief glimpses of those we know to haunt the wood — more primitive knights in horned helmets and one giant figure, cloaked in fur and wearing the towering antlers of a stag. Hern, the Hunter, perhaps?

Snow-covered mountains surround a still lake; the shores show no sign of habitation or life; except the two knights again. They face across to a small island; almost covering it is a mossy castle, square and squat, somehow menacing in its isolation and lifelessness. They have arrived on this shore by means of an unmanned ship, dragon-prowed, which appeared noiselessly from the mist, trailing banners of white samite.

Of course, there are a few oddities. The film opens in absolutely impenetrable fog. Through it we hear the clatter of approaching hooves. King Arthur gallops into view (it can be no other; his costume is identifiable from The Boy's etc.) followed by his squire. Unfortunately, he has no horse. He is going gallopy-gallopy on his own two feet, and his squire is clapping coconut shells together to produce the correct sound. He then gets into a silly conversation with the guard on the wall of a castle (there are a *lot* of castles in this film) as to where he got the coconut shells.

OK, I confess. I've been talking about *Monty Python and the Holy Grail.* It's a *silly* movie; as inspiredly silly as the TV series, *Monty Python's Flying Circus.* I've been meaning to touch on the series, having been an addict since the first show appeared from across the water, since every once in a while the MP group will meander, in the shapeless course of the show, into a science fiction sketch (besides the fact that most comedy, by its nature, is fantasy and MPFC — particularly its animations — is more fantastical than most).

There was one such sketch wherein a flying saucer over London sends down a ray which turns Englishmen into Scotsmen, complete with kilts and red beards, who then march north across the border. It all has to do with a plot from outer space for an alien win at Wimbledon, and it ends with a

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**A new time travel story from Poul Anderson, whose recent books include *The Day of Their Return* (Signet) and *Homeward and Beyond* (Doubleday).**

# Gibraltar Falls

## by POUL ANDERSON

The Time Patrol base would only remain for the hundred-odd years of inflow. During that while, few people other than scientists and maintenance crew would stay there for long at a stretch. Thus it was small, a lodge and a couple of service buildings, nearly lost in the land.

Five and a half million years before he was born, Tom Nomura found that southern end of Iberia still more steep than he remembered it. Hills climbed sharply northward until they became low mountains walling the sky, riven by canyons where shadows lay blue. It was dry country, rained on violently but briefly in winter, its streams shrunken to runnels or nothing as its grass burnt yellow in summer. Trees and shrubs grew far apart, thorn, mimosa, acacia, pine, aloe; around the waterholes palm, fern, orchid.

Withal, it was rich in life. Hawks and vultures were always at hover in cloudless heaven. Grazing herds mingled their millions together; among their scores of kinds of zebra-striped ponies, primitive rhinoceros, okapi-like ancestors of the giraffe, somtimes mastodon — thinly red-haired, hugely tusked — or peculiar elephants. Among the predators and scavengers were sabertooths, early forms of the big cats, hyenas, and scuttering ground apes which occasionally walked on their hind legs. Antheaps lifted six feet into the air. Marmots whistled.

It smelled of hay, scorch, baked dung and warm flesh. When wind awoke, it boomed, pushed, threw dust and heat into the face. Often the earth resounded to hoofbeats, birds clamored or beasts trumpeted. At night a sudden chill struck down, and the stars were so many that one didn't much notice the alienness of their constellations.



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Thus had things been until lately. And as yet there was no great change. But now had begun a hundred years of thunder. When that was done, nothing would ever be the same again.

Manse Everard regarded Tom Nomura and Feliz a Rach for a squinting moment before he smiled and said, "No, thanks, I'll just poke around here today. You go have fun."

Did an eyelid of the big, bent-nosed, slightly grizzled man droop a little in Nomura's direction? The latter couldn't be sure. They were from the same milieu, indeed the same country. That Everard had been recruited in New York, 1954 A.D., and Nomura in San Francisco, 1972, ought to make scant difference. The upheavals of that generation were bubble pops against what had happened before and what would happen after. However, Nomura was fresh out of the Academy, a bare twenty-five-years of lifespan behind him. Everard hadn't told how much time his own farings through the world's duration added up to; and given the longevity treatment the Patrol offered its people, it was impossible to guess. Nomura suspected the Unattached agent had seen enough existence to have become more foreign to him than Feliz — who was born two millenniums past either of them.

"Very well, let's start," she said. Curt though it was, Nomura thought her voice made music of the Temporal language.

They stepped from the veranda and walked across the yard. A couple of other corpsmen hailed them, with a pleasure directed at her. Nomura agreed. She was young and tall, the curve-nosed strength of her features softened by large green eyes, large mobile mouth, hair that shone auburn in spite of being hacked off at the ears. The usual gray coverall and stout boots could not hide her figure or the suppleness of her stride. Nomura knew he himself wasn't bad-looking — a stocky but limber frame, high-cheeked regular features, tawny skin — but she made him feel drab.

*Also inside,* he thought. *How does a new-minted Patrolman — not even slated for police duty, a mere naturalist — how does he tell an aristocrat of the First Matriarchy that he's fallen in love with her?*

The rumbling which always filled the air, these miles from the cataracts, sounded to him like a chorus. Was it imagination, or did he really sense an endless shudder through the ground, up into his bones?

Feliz opened a shed. Several hoppers stood inside, vaguely

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resembling wheelless two-seater motorcycles, propelled by antigravity and capable of leaping across several thousand years. (They and their present riders had been transported hither in heavy-duty shuttles.) Hers was loaded with recording gear. He had failed to convince her it was overburdened and knew she'd never forgive him if he finked on her. His invitation to Everard — the ranking officer in hand, though here-now simply on vacation — to join them today had been made in a vague hope that the latter would see that load and order her to let her assistant carry part of it.

She sprang to the saddle. "Come on!" she said. "The morning's getting old."

He mounted his vehicle and touched controls. Both glided outside and aloft. At eagle height, they leveled off and bore south, where the River Ocean poured into the Middle of the World.

Banks of upflung mist always edged that horizon, argent smoking off into azure. As one drew near afoot, they loomed topplingly overhead. Further on, the universe swirled gray, shaken by the roar, bitter on human lips, while water flowed off rock and gouged through mud. So thick was the cold salt fog that it was unsafe to breathe for more than a few minutes.

From well above, the sight was yet more awesome. There one could see the end of a geological epoch. For a million and a half years the Mediterranean basin had lain a desert. Now the Gates of Hercules stood open and the Atlantic was coming through.

The wind of his passage around him, Nomura peered west across unrestful, many-hued and intricately foam-streaked immensity. He could see the currents run, sucked toward the new-made gap between Europe and Africa. There they clashed together and recoiled, a white and green chaos whose violence toned from earth to heaven and back, crumbled cliffs, overwhelmed valleys, blanketed the shore in spume for miles inland. From them came a stream, snow-colored in its fury, with flashes of livid emerald, to stand in an eight-mile wall between the continents and bellow. Spray roiled aloft, dimming the torrent after torrent, wherein the sea crashed onward.

Rainbows wheeled through the clouds it made. This far aloft, the noise was no more than a monstrous millstone grinding. Nomura could clearly hear Feliz's voice out of his receiver, as she stopped her vehicle and lifted an arm. "Hold. I want a few more takes before we go on."

"Haven't you enough?" he asked.

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Her words softened. "How can we get enough of a miracle?"

His heart jumped. *She's not a she-soldier, born to lord it over a ruck of underlings. In spite of her early life and ways, she isn't. She feels the dread, the beauty, yes, the sense of God at work —*

A wry grin at himself: *She'd better!*

After all, her task was to make a full-sensory record of the whole thing, from its beginning until that day when, a hundred years hence, the basin was full and the sea lapped calm where Odysseus would sail. It would take months of her lifespan. (*And mine, please, mine.*) Everybody in the corps wanted to experience this stupendousness; the hope of adventure was practically required for recruitment. But it wasn't feasible for many to come so far downstairs, crowding into so narrow a time-slot. Most would have to do it vicariously. Their chiefs would not have picked someone who was not a considerable artist, to live it on their behalf and pass it on to them.

Nomura remembered his astonishment when he was assigned to assist her. Short-handed as it was, could the Patrol afford artists?

Well, after he answered a cryptic advertisement and took several puzzling tests and learned about intertemporal traffic, he had wondered if police and rescue work were possible and been told that, usually, they were. He could see the need for administrative and clerical personnel, resident agents, historiographers, anthropologists, and, yes, natural scientists like himself. In the weeks they had been working together, Feliz convinced him that a few artists were at least as vital. Man does not live by bread alone, nor guns, paperwork, theses, naked practicalities.

She re-stowed her apparatus. "Come," she ordered. As she flashed eastward ahead of him, her hair caught a sunbeam and shone as if molten. He trudged mute in her wake.

The Mediterranean floor lay ten thousand feet below sea level. The inflow took most of that drop within a fifty-mile strait. Its volume amounted to ten thousand cubic miles a year, a hundred Victoria Falls or a thousand Niagaras.

Thus the statistics. The reality was a roar of white water, spray-shrouded, earth-sundering, mountain-shaking. Men could see, hear, feel, smell, taste the thing; they could not imagine it.

When the channel widened, the flow grew smoother, until it ran green and black Then mists diminished and islands appeared, like ships which cast up huge bow waves; and life could again grow or go clear to the shore. Yet most of

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those islands would be eroded away before the century was out, and much of that life would perish in weather turned strange. For this event would move the planet from its Miocene to its Pliocene epoch.

And as he flitted onward, Nomura did not hear less noise, but more. Though the stream itself was quieter here, it moved toward a bass clamor which grew and grew till heaven was one brazen bell. He recognized a headland whose worn-down remnant would someday bear the name Gibralter. Not far beyond, a cataract twenty miles wide made almost half the total plunge.

With terrifying ease, the waters slipped over that brink. They were glass-green against the darkling cliffs and umber grass of the continents. Light flamed off their heights. At their bottom another cloud bank rolled white in ever-ending winds. Beyond reached a blue sheet, a lake whence rivers hewed canyons, out and out across the alkaline sparkle, dust devils and mirage shimmers of the furnace land which they would make into a sea.

It boomed, it brawled, it querned.

Again Feliz poised her flyer. Nomura drew alongside. They were high; the air whittered chilly around them.

"Today," she told him, "I want to try for an impression of the sheer size. I'll move in close to the top, recording as I go, and then down."

"Not too close," he warned.

She bridled. "I'll judge that."

"Uh, I. . . I'm not trying to boss you or anything." *I'd better not, I, a plebe and a male.* "As a favor, please —" Nomura flinched at his own clumsy speech. "— be careful, will you? I mean, you're important to me."

Her smile burst upon him. She leaned hard against her safety harness to catch his hand. "Thank you, Tom." After a moment, turned grave: "Men like you make me understand what is wrong in the age I come from."

She had often spoken kindly to him: most times, in fact. Had she been a strident militant, no amount of comeliness would have kept him awake nights. He wondered if perhaps he had begun loving her when first he noticed how conscientiously she strove to regard him as her equal. It was not easy for her, she being almost as new in the Patrol as he — no easier than it was for men from other areas to believe, down inside where it counted, that she had the same capabilities they did and that it was right she use herself to the full.

She couldn't stay solemn. "Come on!" she shouted. "Hurry! That straight dropoff won't last another twenty years!"

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Her machine darted. He slapped down the face screen of his helmet and plunged after, bearing the tapes and power cells and other auxiliary items. *Be careful,* he pleaded; *oh, be careful, my darling.*

She had gotten well ahead. He saw her like a comet, a dragonfly, everything vivid and swift, limned athwart yonder mile-high precipice of sea. The noise grew in him till there was nothing else, his skull was full of its doomsday.

Yards from the waters, she rode her hopper chasmward. Her head was buried in a dial-studded box, her hands at work on its settings, she steered with her knees Salt spray began to fog Nomura's screen. He activated the self-cleaner. Turbulence clawed at him; his carrier lurched. His eardrums, guarded against sound but not changing pressure, stabbed with pain.

He had come quite near Feliz when her vehicle went crazy. He saw it spin, saw it strike the green immensity, saw it and her engulfed. He could not hear himself scream through the thunder.

He rammed the speed switch, swooped after her. Was it blind instinct which sent him whirling away again, inches before the torrent grabbed him too? She was gone from sight. There was only the water wall, clouds below and unpitying blue calm above, the noise that took him in its jaws to shake him apart, the cold, the damp, the salt on his mouth that tasted like tears.

He fled for help.

Noonday glowered outside. The land looked bleached, lay moveless and lifeless except for a carrion bird. The distant falls alone had voice.

A knock on the door of his room brought Nomura off the bed, onto his feet. Through an immediately rackety pulse he croaked, "Come in. Do."

Everard entered. In spite of air conditioning, sweat spotted his garments. He gnawed a fireless pipe and his shoulders slumped.

"What's the word?" Nomura begged of him.

"As I feared. Nothing. She never returned home."

Nomura sank into a chair and stared before him. "You're certain?"

Everard sat down on the bed, which creaked beneath his weight. "Yeah. The message capsule just arrived. In answer to my inquiry, et cetera, Agent Feliz a Rach has not reported back to her home milieu base from the Gibralter assignment, and they have no further record of her."

"Not in *any* era?"

"The way agents move around in time and space, nobody keeps

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dossiers, except maybe the Danellians."

"Ask them!"

"Do you imagine they'd reply?" Everard snapped — they, the supermen of the remote future who were the founders and ultimate masters of the Patrol. One big fist clenched on his knee. "And don't tell me we ordinary mortals could keep closer tabs if we wanted to. Have you checked your personal future, son? We don't want to, and that's that."

The roughness left him. He shifted the pipe about in his grip and said most gently, "If we live long enough, we outlive those we've cared for. The common fate of man; nothing unique to our corps. But I'm sorry you had to strike it so young."

"Never mind me!" Nomura exclaimed. "What of her?"

"Yes. . . I've been thinking about your account. My guess is, the airflow patterns are worse than tricky around that fall. What should've been expected, no doubt. Overloaded, her hopper was less controllable than usual. An air pocket, a flaw, whatever it was, something like that grabbed her without warning and tossed her into the stream."

Nomura's fingers writhed against each other. "And I was supposed to look after her."

Everard shook his head. "Don't punish yourself worse. You were simply her assistant. She should have been more careful."

"But — God damn it, we can rescue her still, and you won't allow us to?" Nomura half screamed.

"Stop," Everard warned. "Stop right there."

*Never say it: that several Patrolmen could ride backward in time, lay hold on her with tractor beams and haul her free of the abyss. Or that I could tell her and my earlier self to beware. It did not happen, therefore it will not happen.*

*It* must *not happen.*

*For the past becomes in fact mutable, as soon as we on our machines have transformed it into our present. And if ever a mortal takes himself that power, where can the changing end? We start by saving a glad girl; we go on to save Lincoln, but somebody else tries to save the Confederate States — No, none less than God can be trusted with time. The Patrol exists to guard what is real. Its men may no more violate that faith than they may violate their own mothers.*

"I'm sorry," Nomura mumbled.

"It's okay, Tom."

"No, I . . . I thought . . . when I saw her vanish, my first thought was that we could make up a party, ride back to that very instant and snatch her clear —"

"A natural thought in a new

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man. Old habits of the mind die hard. The fact is, we did not. It'd scarcely have been authorized anyway. Too dangerous. We can ill afford to lose more. Certainly we can't when the record shows that our rescue attempt would be foredoomed if we made it."

"Is there no way to get around that?"

Everard sighed. "I can't think of any. Make your peace with fate, Tom." He hesitated. "Can I . . . can we do anything for you?"

"No." It came harsh out of Nomura's throat. "Except leave me be for a while."

"Sure." Everard rose. "You weren't the only person who thought a lot of her," he reminded, and left.

When the door had closed behind him, the sound of the falls seemed to wax, grinding, grinding. Nomura stared at emptiness. The sun passed its apex and began to slide very slowly toward night.

*I should have gone after her myself, at once.*

*And risked my life.*

*Why not follow her into death, then?*

*No. That's senseless. Two deaths do not make a life. I couldn't have saved her, I didn't have the equipment or — The sane thing was to fetch help.*

*Only the help was denied — whether by man or by fate hardly matters, does it? — and so she went down. The stream hurled her into the gulf, she had a moment's terror before it smashed the awareness out of her, then at the bottom it crushed her, plucked her apart, strewed the pieces of her bones across the floor of a sea that I, a youngster, will sail upon one holiday, unknowing that there is a Time Patrol or ever was a Feliz. Oh, God, I want my dust down with hers, five and a half million years from this hour!*

A remote cannonade went through the air, a tremor through earth and floor. An undercut bank must have crumbled into the torrent. It was the kind of scene she would have loved to capture.

"Would have?" Nomura yelled and surged from the chair. The ground still vibrated beneath him. "She will!"

He ought to have consulted Everard, but feared — perhaps mistakenly, in his grief and his inexperience — that he would be refused permission and sent upstairs at once.

He ought to have rested for several days, but feared that his manner would betray him. A stimulant pill must serve in place of nature.

He ought to have checked out a tractor unit, not smuggled it into the locker on his vehicle.

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When he took the hopper forth, a Patrolman who saw asked where he was bound. "For a ride," Nomura answered. The other nodded sympathetically. He might not suspect that a love had been lost, but the loss of a comrade was bad enough. Nomura was careful to get well over the northern horizon before he swung toward the seafall.

Right and left, it reached further than he could see. Here, more than halfway down that cliff of green glass, the very curve of the planet hid its ends from him. Then as he entered the spume clouds, whiteness enfolded him, roiling and stinging.

His face shield stayed clear, but vision was ragged, upward along immensity. The helmet warded his hearing but could not stave off the storm which rattled his teeth and heart and skeleton. Winds whirled and smote, the carrier staggered, he must fight for every inch of control.

And to find the exact second —

Back and forth he leaped across time, reset the verniers, reflicked the main switch, glimpsed himself vague in the mists, and peered through them toward heaven: over and over, until abruptly he was *then*.

Twin gleams far above . . . He saw the one strike and go under, go down, while the other darted around until soon it ran away. Its rider had not seen him, where he lurked in the chill salt mists. His presence was not on any damned record.

He darted forward. Yet patience was upon him. He could cruise for a long piece of lifespan if need be, seeking the trice which would be his. The fear of death, even the knowing that she might be dead when he found her, were like half-remembered dreams. The elemental powers had taken him. He was a will that flew.

He hovered within a yard of the water. Gusts tried to cast him into its grip, as they had done to her. He was ready for them, danced free, returned to peer — returned through time as well as space, so that a score of him searched along the fall in that span of seconds when Feliz might be alive.

He paid his other selves no heed. They were merely stages he had gone through or must still go through.

THERE!

The dim dark shape tumbled past him, beneath the flood, on its way to destruction. He spun a control. A tractor beam locked onto the other machine. His reeled and went after it, unable to pull such a mass free of such a might.

The tide nearly had him when help came. Two vehicles, three, four, all straining together, they hauled Feliz's loose. She sagged

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horribly limp in her saddle harness. He didn't go to her at once. First he went back those few blinks in time, and back, and back, to be her rescuer and his own.

When finally they were alone among fogs and furies, she freed and in his arms, he would have burnt a hole through the sky to get shore where he could care for her. But she stirred, her eyes blinked open, after a minute she smiled at him. Then he wept.

Beside them, the ocean roared onward.

The sunset to which Nomura had leaped ahead was not on anybody's record either. It turned the land golden. The falls must be afire with it. Their song resounded beneath the evening star.

Feliz propped pillows against headboard, sat straighter in the bed where she was resting, and told Everard: "If you lay charges against him, that he broke regulations or whatever male stupidity you are thinking of, I'll also quit your bloody Patrol."

"Oh, no." The big man lifted a palm as if to fend off attack. "Please. You misunderstand. I only meant to say, we're in a slightly awkward position."

"How?" Nomura demanded, from the chair in which he sat and held Feliz' hand. "I wasn't under any orders not to attempt this, was I? All right, agents are supposed to safeguard their own lives if possible, as being valuable to the corps. Well, doesn't it follow that the salvaging of a life is worthwhile too?"

"Yes. Sure." Everard paced the floor. It thudded beneath his boots, above the drumbeat of the flood. "Nobody quarrels with success, even in a much tighter organization than ours. In fact, Tom, the initiative you showed today makes your future prospects look good, believe me." A grin went lopsided around his pipestem. "As for an old soldier like myself, it'll be forgiven that I was too ready to give up." A flick of somberness: "I've seen so many lost beyond hope."

He stopped in his treading, confronted them both, and stated: "But we cannot have loose ends. The fact is, her unit does not list Feliz a Rach as returning, ever."

Their clasps tightened on each other.

Everard gave him and her a smile — haunted, nevertheless a smile — before he continued: "Don't get scared, though. Tom, earlier you wondered why we, we ordinary humans at least, don't keep closer track of our people. Now do you see the reason?

"Feliz a Rach never checked back into her original base. She may have visited her former home, of course, but we don't ask

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officially what agents do on their furloughs." He drew breath. "As for the rest of her career, if she should want to transfer to a different headquarters and adopt a different name, why, any officer of sufficient rank could approve that. Me, for example.

"We operate loose in the Patrol. We dare not do otherwise."

Nomura understood, and shivered.

Feliz recalled him to the ordinary world. "But who might I become?" she wondered.

He pounced on the cue. "Well," he said, half in laughter and half in thunder, "how about Mrs. Thomas Nomura?"

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(*Films, from page 94*)

tennis match between a Scot and an extraterrestrial who looks like a gigantic *blanc-mange.*

It's pretty hard to convey the quality; one really has to be tuned into that particularly English Goon Show, Lewis Carroll type of non-sequitur humor to appreciate it, and the movie, though a coherent (well, sort of) narrative rather than short sketches, is equally indescibable (is there *any* point, for instance, in mentioning the Holy Hand Grenade that is used to conquer the terrible monster of Caer Bannog?).

But I am disturbed at the visual qualities of the film. There are moments which are literal evocations of Tolkien, Garner, and other of the magic English writers. I'm not putting this film down because they so accurately captured this quality; I am just bitterly unhappy that no filmmaker has been able to use it seriously. Is there enough of an audience to economically justify the making of a serious fantasy film? I doubt it, as of now, but there are hints that the barriers might be breaking; this film is one, and there is the widespread attention paid to *Shardik* (not entirely positive, granted) which might make it to film, and which is in its mythical-kingdom milieu, though not its action, close to a sword-and-sorcery work.

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**In which the young man known as Blacklantern, seeking to join the Benefactors to bring civilization to his home planet, instead finds himself in the middle of a terrorist conflict.**

# Counterkill

## by JACK WILLIAMSON

1.

In the Sand clan suburb of Nggonggamba, the one-legged guide waved a yellow crutch to lead his sunburnt tourist flock off the passenger slideway to a sun-parched ramp. Before them stood a blank stone wall, broken only with a tall iron door, black from smoke.

"What's this?" A fat and dew-lapped otherworlder mopped at his sweat and scowled up and down the empty platform. "What's to see here?"

"The tragedy of our planet."

The old guide's voice boomed out of his black-leather face with an unexpected eloquence. Hopping vigorously ahead, he swung the crutch toward the fire-bombed door and the crude native script splashed in red across the wall.

"'Nggars beware!' That's what it says. 'The Night clan warns you! Sunsdeath is coming! The just wrath of Cru Creetha must be cooled with alien blood."

The crutch dropped to indicate a rough drawing placed like a signature, the outline of a red-eyed angular creature, dangling snaky tentacles.

"So some vandal paints a slogan on a wall," the fat man grumbled. "We've seen the same red scrawl all over the city. What's that to us?"

"For one thing," the guide said, "it means our tour is over. Because of the Night clan terrorists and the near approach of Sunsdeath, all tourists visas have been canceled, effective at sunset. I stopped you here to show you why."

"Swindler!" A rawboned blonde turned up her translator till its bellow echoed off the fire-scarred wall. "I'll have you know I've paid in advance for the Black Desert Safari. Five days and four nights at air camps or full-service hotels, with spotters and beaters included



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and a trophy kill guaranteed."

"Respected visitor," the guide said gently, "I advise you to take your own head away while you have it."

"I'll have you know that I'm a professor of exoethnography." She bridled indignantly. "I demand my trophy kill or a full refund."

"You may speak to the office," the guide said. "But I won't be there. You few people are my last tour group. The terror has ruined our business, and I've had my fill of fire and bombs. ...Where am I going, sir? To an old town named Krongkor, off at the far end of our long sea. A busy trading center in the old days before the space gate opened, but a quiet refuge now, well out of the terror. I have spent my savings to buy a hotel there."

His voice became a droning chant.

"A noble landmark, respected guests. A monumental relic of our historic past. If our darkened star is indeed restored — if you ever return to Nggongga — I hope you will plan to visit me there. I promise you the hospitality of the old desert clans, as it was before the shadow of terror fell upon us. We offer full service, with the latest cooler equipment, and we feature the local seafoods and wines."

"Don't hold a room for me!" shrilled a scrawny otherworlder cloaked in the fog from his cooler suit. "Frankly, I'm baffled by all this talk of terror. I happen to own a few shares of space transport, and I came here to look at my investment. We've brought you people all the benefits of technological progress. I came here expecting gratitude. Instead, it seems you want to run us off your backward planet."

"Respected sir, you state our situation precisely." The lean old black gave him an ironic bow. "We've had several generations of your sort of progress. Most of us are sick of it. That's what makes this coming Sunsdeath so dangerous to you."

"Sunsdeath?" the fat man wheezed. "What's Sunsdeath?"

"A failure of our star. The cause is not clearly known, but the event has happened perhaps once in a long life span, ever since the colonists landed. There are rains of meteors. The darkness is commonly complete. It lasts sometimes for a whole day. On past occasions, however, the star has always been restored."

"An eclipse!" the scrawny man scoffed. "Don't you know about eclipses?"

"I know the lunar theory, sir. But Nggongga has no moon."

"Have you another theory?"

"Our priests do," the guide said. "They say the star is eaten by the red-eyed dragon-god Cru

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Creetha, whose symbol you see on the wall."

"You mean the hunger of Cru Creetha is predictable?" The tourist squinted skeptically into the glaring sun. "Like the motions of a moon?"

"The priests do have foreknowledge, sir. Cru Creetha is believed to act from wrath. His present anger is said to be directed at the otherworld invasion of Nggongga, which has led so many of our people to forget their ancient ways. His most fanatic followers are preaching that the sun will not come back until the head of every alien has been piled around his altars."

"Superstitious nonsense!" the fat man muttered. "I say your priests are ignorant fools — or more likely they are cunning rascals deceiving ignorant fools."

"I myself am no believer in Cru Creetha." The old guide shrugged blandly. "Yet I can show you reasons for the revival of his cruel faith. That's why I brought you here."

His crutch spun toward the smoke-darkened wall and its red-painted slogans.

"Here you see a chapter of our sad history, written in flame and blood. The tragedy of the Nggars. They're a foundation family — the first Nggar was one of those bold adventurers wsho opened the space gate and came through to build Nggonggamba. He grew fat on the sweat and blood of a million poor blacks gathering muskweed in the desert to make his famous perfumes. The generations of Nggars have always ruled that rich trade. Though they've married native women, they're still otherworlders, using their alien know-how to plunder Nggongga. That's why we don't love them."

With a startling savagery, his crutch slammed the smoky stone.

"That's why today you find NggeeNggar — the current family head — hiding in his compound with these marks of terror on the wall. That's why he has run off his black retainers and brought queer green speechless people from another world to be his bodyguards. That's why he has sent his son away to be educated on another planet. The Night clan fanatics are howling for his head."

"I think your whole stinking planet is sick." The professor of exoethnography elevated her sun-blistered nose. "If you want my professional opinion, you're too primitive for uncontrolled contact with civilization. You're suffering from technological shock. I think you need the doctors of progress. The Benefactors."

"I've known Benefactors." Unimpressed, the old guide shrugged. "Sometimes they keep a resident

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agent here. They have taken two of our young men to be trained on Xyr. I suppose they mean well — but what can one man do for a hundred million?

"Or against Cru Creetha?"

His crutch stabbed at the red-eyed dragon-god.

"One of our cadets on Xyr is Lylik, the heir of Nggo Nggar. The other is now named Blacklantern — who fought tlys in our arena here before he had a name. They are brave young men. I'm sure the Benefactors are training them well. But I'm afraid they'll find Cru Creetha harder to conquer than any unmilked tly."

Xyr was a new-found ocean world, whose islands held the administrative complex of the Benefactors, with the schools and labs and computers and everything else that made it the nerve center for the planned new universe of galactic man. In his first year there, Blacklantern had chafed unhappily under the discipline of his instructors and the sophistication of his fellow cadets.

Things had gone better since Lylik came.

Fellow Nggonggans, they decided to room together. He liked Lylik's shy modesty about his family and his fortune, and Lylik admired his skills in the arena. They soon discovered more things in common — impatience with authority and pleasure in a fight.

At an off-limits bar in the interworld zone, they disabled a gang of cargo handlers who didn't like their color. On disciplinary probation for that, they exchanged daggers in the ritual of brotherhood that Blacklanter had learned in the arena, and Lylik began to share the native nuts and sweets that his mother sent from Nggonggamba.

In all his hard climb from the alleys and gutters of his childhood, Blacklantern had never enjoyed such a genuine friend. He was distressed when he found Lylik worrying about trouble at home.

"There's always trouble on Nggongga." He tried to be cheerful. "We're too primitive to produce much but poverty and pain. That's why I want to be a Benefactor. To help bring civilization."

"The trouble is my parents." Lylik was chewing a saltflower seed, and its narcotic sweetness filled their study room. "I can't find out what is really wrong. My father's too badly crippled to write, and he won't make tapes because his voice is bad. My mother was hurt last year, when a Night clan terrorist tried to kill them. I don't know how badly. The nurse keeps writing that she's better, but I want to go home to see for myself."

Before he got permission to go,

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however, the shadow of terror fell across the long light-years from Nggongga. Classes were over, that bright afternoon. Blacklantern had been teaching Lylik the weaves and feints and vaults of the arena, and they were jogging across the hexangle toward the gym for another lesson. A queer high voice quavered behind them.

"— Nggar!" Their translators took a moment to pick it up. "Cadet Lylik of Nggar! Spacemail parcel for you."

They waited for the yellow-clad carrier. A squat pale hairless man, so massive that he looked monstrous. He gave Lylik the parcel and bounded away. Blacklantern glimpsed the stark ferocity on his face and sprang to intercept him. He snatched a dagger from beneath his flying cloak. Blacklantern danced in, grasping and twisting at the dagger arm as if it had been a tly's venomous sting. They grappled and recoiled. Blacklantern stumbled backward, the red-dripping dagger in his hand. The dwarf slumped toward Lylik, all his ferocity erased.

"My good mother!" Still unaware of their silent brief encounter, Lylik was tearing his parcel open. "Never too ill to send more Nggonggan goodies. She must think the Benefactors are starving —"

A thundercrack cut off his voice.

A pale flash dazzled Blacklantern. A sudden gust slammed him forward. In the ringing calm that followed instantly, he turned to look for Lylik and the dwarf. Where they had been, a raw new crater was cut through turf and gravel and clay.

In the aftermath, he stood in a tower office above the hexangle, relating that shattering incident to Benefactor Thornwall.

"Am I to blame?" He saw disapproval in the old man's eyes, and felt a surge of indignation. "The dwarf was killing Lylik and attempting to escape. As Lylik's dagger-brother, I owed blood for blood." A defiant satisfaction drew him erect. "The way things happened, I killed the killer."

"Which has unfortunate consequences," Thornwall said. "As violence commonly does. If the man had survived, he might have told us who sent him here."

"Lylik's parents have been attacked by the terrorists on Nggongga. I suppose the bomb came from there."

"Evidently." Thornwall nodded. "Though the device was not exactly a bomb. Our experts say it was part of a space gate. An ejection field circuit. Stolen, maybe, from some repair crew."

"So Lylik was thrown somewhere out of space?" He scowled at

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the red-robed Benefactor. "With no nexus bonds or receptor fields to bring him back anywhere." His black hands lifted as if to grapple with a tly. "When I get out of training, I want duty on Nggongga. I want to hunt the terrorists down —"

Thornwall held up a blue-veined hand.

"Cadet Blacklantern." His tone turned formal. "I have something painful to say. Your mentors have voted to terminate your preparatory fellowship. That means your training here has ended. We're sending you home — but not as a Benefactor."

"Why?" He found breath at last. "Because I killed that murderer?"

Slowly, sadly, Thornwall shook his silvered head.

"The error was mine, when I brought you to Xyr. Or perhaps a blunder of the whole fellowship, when we offered our aid to Nggongga. I'm afraid the planet is still too primitive for us."

"You promised —" he whispered bitterly. "Promised to make me a Benefactor."

"But look at yourself." The old man paused, biting thin blue lips. "Remember that we condone no violence — and think of the blood we found on that dagger. I do admire your courage. Even your skill at killing. But the mentors feel that you have always been too ready with every sort of weapon. I'm afraid you're violence prone."

"Where I grew up —" He drew a long uneven breath. "Where I grew up, you had to fight or die."

"So I know." Thornwall's time-worn face twisted as if with actual pain. "But, as Benefactors, we are pledged to solve our problems with intelligence and compassion. I had hoped that our training might change you — but the violence shows you killed that man with no thought at all, almost as a reflex act."

"I — I don't understand."

"That's the trouble," Thornwall said. "Precisely."

"I want to be a Benefactor." Desperation shook his voice. "I — I'll try to learn, sir."

"It is not only you." Thornwall frowned at the winking signals on his computer terminal. "Your whole world seems prone to excessive violence. We've just received distressing news from Nggongga. When our resident agent there unlocked his office this morning, he triggered another implosion device."

Blacklantern shivered inwardly, from a sense of secret and implacable evil more deadly than any peril he had ever faced in the arena.

"Sorry." Thornwall gave him a stiff little bow of farewell. "The

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fault is only partly yours. We ourselves are not prepared to cope with terror. I might add, too, that I wanted to keep you here. I was overruled. There are too few of us and too many worlds where our aid is wanted.

"The Benefactors are pulling out of Nggongga."

2.

The girl spoke to him as he left the portal dome in Nggonggamba. In the moment before his translator picked up her language, there was only the low-pitched music of her voice, which somehow recalled the midsummer songs of the Sand clan women. Eyes wide, he forgot that he had come home friendless and planless and almost desperate.

"— waiting for you," she was saying. "Did you know a cadet Benefactor named Lylik of Nggar?"

She was nearly his own height, with red-golden hair, pale-golden skin, green-golden eyes. Her garb was bright and oddly cut, too scant to shield her from the harsh Nggonggan sun, but he liked the way it displayed her clean athletic grace.

"Lylik was my dagger-brother." The words stabbed him again, like an actual blade. "His killing is a debt of blood I hope to pay."

"Perhaps I can help you."

He stepped warily backward, recalling the traps for newcomers he had sometimes helped to set. Travelers to and from a hundred worlds were hurrying past, but he saw no eyes on them. Sharply, he peered at her.

"I am *Dzany Dzu.*" That was the sound of it in her own melodious language, but his translator said "Snowfire." She showed him the name emblem of her ring: a gold flame rising from a white snow crystal. "You are Blacklantern?"

"Maybe," he admitted. "What do you want?"

She moved so close he caught her faint perfume, a cool sweetleaf scent.

"We could be watched," she murmured. "Let's go where we can talk."

"Why not?"

He followed her off the concourse, into a wide arcade walled with shops. She stopped beneath a sign that winked NGGONGGAN EXPORTS — TAX FREE!

"Stand close," she whispered. "Act like you admire me."

Still distrustful, he eyed two young blacks inside the shop. They were haggling for an antique mangun, and he wondered if he might be their intended target. An old woman in white-fringed mourning was sniffing and selecting dry yellow stalks of muskweed incense. Breathing the familiar heavy bitter-

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sweetness, he was swept back into his boyhood. Xyr was suddenly far away, and old Thornwall's parting words no longer hurt so much. If he was really violence prone, Nggongga was where he belonged.

"Now what?" He tried to recall his caution. "What about Lylik?"

"I know how he was killed."

She caught his hand, to lead him along the displays. A tly's egg — or the dusty shell of one — crudely painted with the black-fanged grimace of Cru Creetha. A tray of hand-forged table daggers. Rough brown pottery bottles of sea-berry wine. A shriveled black trophy head.

Cheap trash, he thought, laid out to trap arriving tourists. The egg was probably plexoid. The daggers were brittle cast metal. The wine would be a weak and evil-flavored imitation. The head had never been human. Yet he followed the girl, playing her game.

"I don't like terror." Her murmur was almost too faint for his translator. "Others don't. We're planning action. We need your talents and your training. If you really want to pay that debt of blood, you will join us."

The old woman had paid for the muskweed sticks. He inspected the trophy head while she shuffled by.

"Perhaps," he said then. "I need to know more."

"That's all I can say." She studied Cru Creetha's dusty snarl. "Until you have decided."

When he looked around, the old woman was gone. One young black was testing the action of the old mangun, while the other paid. Drawing a deep breath of the fragrant muskweek cloud, he smiled at the girl.

"I'll go with you," he said.

Holding his hand, or walking so near that their hips and shoulders collided slightly, she led him out of the arcade into a long triangular park betwen two diverging ways that carried traffic from the portal. As they came into the open, he felt her flinch from the sun's blinding glare, but he raised his face to it and inhaled again, enjoying the dry heat and the rich scents he had always known.

The park was almost empty, abandoned to the sun. At the far end, a tiny knot of listeners were gathered around a shouting speaker. Nearer, a big man sat alone on an unshaded bench. Like lovers strolling, they approached him.

"Hello," the girl said. "I've found a friend."

Fair-skinned, the man wore the bright shorts and sandals of an unwarned otherworlder. With neither the enormous flat hat the natives had invented nor the cooler cloak the tourists wore, he was already burning. His head was a

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huge bald egg, now pink on top.

"Clayman," the girl murmured. "Blacklantern."

The man looked up, through multiscopic glasses. They had heavy black rims, around wide blank lenses. They whirred faintly, changing focus to inspect him.

"I hate terror." Clayman's voice clinked like metal. "We fight it. I believe Snowfire has invited you to join us."

"I —" Before the cold stare of those humming lenses, he had to catch his breath. "I want to join."

"You understand our terms of enlistment?" The round pale face was almost genial, but the lenses looked inhuman and cold. "When you join us, you're in for life. Beyond this point, you cannot withdraw."

"I understand."

With no show of approval, Clayman nodded at the opposite bench. They sat. Snowfire slipped her golden arm around Blacklantern. He breathed her sweetleaf scent.

"We call ourselves Counterkill." Clayman's voice was hushed, harsh. "Our emblem is lightning striking a coiled snake. We have all suffered from terror, but we strike back with a greater terror. Our discipline is strict. You will obey me absolutely. Is that clear?"

He glanced into the girl's bright face, troubled at the contrast betwen Clayman's flat deadliness and her appealing charm. When the lenses hummed, as if for a better focus, he realized that he had hesitated.

"Afraid?" the translator rasped. "You have already come too far to quit."

"I won't quit," he muttered hastily. "I've a debt of blood to pay."

Snowfire moved closer and murmured something, playing her role.

"One thing more," Clayman rapped. "We protect ourselves. Our cells are small. We kill snoopers. You are not to ask about anything beyond your duty. You will never reveal anything you happen to learn. Understand?"

"I do."

"A few facts you must know." Savagely, Clayman slapped a fly on his fleshy knee. "We operate elsewhere. Recently we learned that a shipment of twelve ejector field units had failed to reach a new portal under construction. We knew they could be modified to make implosion devices. When they began detonating, we came here to offer our services. We are already in contact with people who need us. We'll be meeting them later today."

"So the terrorists have ten more bombs?"

"I'll make the inferences,"

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Clayman snapped. "You'll obey my orders."

Blacklantern felt an urge to hit him, but the girl was clinging to his arm.

"We're tourists here," she chattered gaily. "With historic sights to see. Let's begin."

"You had better get out of the sun," he told Clayman. "Or you won't be fit for anything."

Strolling down the park to the passenger ramps, they passed the white-robed speaker and his audience, all sweating beneath wide flat hats in the colors of their clans.

"— again I say it." The hoarse shouting arrested him. "The dark god Cru Creetha has appeared to me. I was alone on a sacred hill outside the city, lighting a dawnfire to aid the return of the sun, when he came down from the sky."

Clayman went tramping on, but Blacklantern caught Snowfire's waist and stopped to listen.

"He appeared as a bodiless head. Larger than a man's. It had two great eyes, ringed with red fire. Floating in the smoke above the sacred fire, Cru Creetha called to me with a voice like monsoon thunder. He gave me the message I bring to you."

Snowfire tugged sharply to follow Clayman, but he swung her back to hear the speaker.

"Sunsdeath is coming — that was Cru Creetha's warning. He gave us nine days — and that was nine days ago. Tomorrow, friends, the sun will die! It cannot shine with Nggongga in bondage. When we drive the otherworld exploiters out, it can be lit again. That is Cru Creetha's promise —"

"Come!" Snowfire whispered fiercely. "Our enemy is the man who operates the remote manipulator, not the superstitious dupe."

Walking on with her, he began to see the impact of terror on Nggongga. Ugly new concrete guard boxes stood along the portal ramps, and the streets beyond had a gritty shabbiness he didn't remember. Armed police rode the traffic ways, and the passengers looked hurried and grim.

Clayman asked the way to a cooler shop, where he bought suncreams and cloaks for Snowfire and himself. At a gunshop, he selected an expensive long-range mangun. While they waited for him, Snowfire played her game of young love so attentively that Blacklantern began to wish it had been real. Clayman kept silent about their destination, until he led them off at the Nggar terminal.

They crossed the ramp, and Clayman thumbed the keyplate at the gate. The portal system has brought many strange races to Nggongga, but Blacklantern was startled by the guards who opened a wicket.

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Naked except for gun belts and short black kilts, they were hairless and darkly green. Even their bulging eyes were green. Half his height and twice his weight, they looked as monstrous as the dwarf he had fought on Xyr. Their evolution, he thought, must have been shaped by a singular environment.

Though they wore translators, they didn't attempt to speak. One stood watching, mangun drawn. The other vanished and soon came back with a heavy, slow, light-brown man who dragged one leg.

"The Nggar," Snowfire whispered. "Nggo of Nggar."

He opened the bottom of the gate to let them in and came limping to meet Blacklantern. His kilt was Sand clan red. Half his face was smiling, the other half scarred and frozen, hideous.

"Blackie!" His voice was a hollow whisper. "Lylik used to speak about you on the tapes he sent from Xyr. I'm glad you're going to be with us."

He held out his sound hand in the Nggonggan greeting, and they touched palms. Blacklantern tried not to look at his face. Lylik had seldom spoken of his father's disabilities, but now he recalled a story he had heard long ago from an old tly handler — that the young Nggar, trying his courage in the arena, had been badly stung by an unmilked tly.

"I hope you aren't alarmed at my people." He waved at the frog-like guards. "They look that way because they're off a heavy planet, one with lots of copper and a hot blue sun. I've got them here because I can't trust the blacks. They're contract labor. Slaves, actually. Their masters don't recognize the Benefactors. I get them through a barter deal. Their translators are set only to mine, to save from corruption."

As he talked, he had led them into a wide brick-paved yard, walled with crowded and ill-matched buildings erected by three generations of Nggars. A bright new business tower overlooked the loading docks of a rust-streaked sheet-metal warehouse that exhaled a rich muskweed fragrance. The huge stone residential palace had been enlarged several times, in clashing styles. A squat green woman stood waiting at the door.

"My friends are coming later to meet with you," Nggar said. "While we wait, Kopopo will show you your rooms."

Mute, she beckoned with a green hand.

"Wait, please." Blacklantern turned back to the lame man. "May I speak to your wife? About Lylik? My dagger-brother —"

"My wife is ill." Pain clouded the live half of Nggar's face. "She was hurt last year, when the

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terrorists booby-trapped our flyer. Badly hurt. She has never recovered. We were afraid to tell her that Lylik is dead. She requires sedation, and she never leaves her room."

"I'm sorry," Blacklantern muttered uncomfortably. "I didn't know."

The green woman had waddled away, and he ran to overtake her. On an upper floor of the rambling palace, she gave him a key-strip and pointed at a door. Inside, he discovered that the room had been Lylik's.

Brown images of him smiled out of a long stereo tank, standing with arena heroes or with glamorous girls. A crystal case held athletic awards he had earned. One whole wall was hung with family portraits, heavily framed. Of the grandparents, only one had been a light-skinned otherworlder. The rest were mixed or black.

Studying the portraits, Blacklantern felt a darkening shadow of mystery and tragedy. He looked longest at Lylik's mother. No darker than Snowfire, she sat proudly, almost defiantly erect. Her dark eyes looked stricken, desolate.

Why? The pictures must have been made before the terror, before her own injury, long before her son's death. What had she foreseen? Her ivory face became a tantalizing riddle.

He prowled the room, searching for clues to that sad puzzle. Beyond the bed, he found a heavy inner door. Somewhere beyond it must be the room that held that tragic prisoner. Suddenly he felt that he had to see her, in spite of Nggar.

With his ear against the door, he heard no sound at all. It was locked, but his hard childhood had taught him how to cope with locks. On impulse, without stopping to weigh the consequences, he masked and fingered his key-strip to open the door.

What he found was no sickroom. Rather, it must have been Lylik's playroom and hobby room. Shelves along one wall held toys and games, long outgrown. Newer metal-working tools lined another wall. One long bench was cluttered with half-assembled electronic and transflection gear. Model spacecraft hung from the ceiling. Toward the end of the room, an old study desk had been rebuilt into a flight simulator, with viewscreens and controls.

A normal boy's room, it told of Lylik's boyhood but offered no clue to the mystery of the Nggars. He found another locked door behind the flight simulator. Listening again, he still heard nothing.

He froze a moment there, key-strip already against the contact plate, hesitant to go on. He knew he shouldn't enjoy the risks of

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adventure as much as he did, but then, he reflected, he was violence prone. Though he shouldn't be violating the house of a friend, he had his debt to Lylik. He listened again and opened the door.

A short dark stair led three steps down, to an older level of the rambling palace. He found himself in a huge wardrobe. One side was hung with kilts and cloaks and hats in Nggar's Sand clan rust-color. A woman's clothing hung along the other side, fragrant with rose-tempered musk.

Nothing stirred in the huge, high-beamed bedroom beyond. Anxiously, he crept around the big antique canopy bed. The curtains were lifted and the bed was empty. If Lylik's invalid mother was confined anywhere —

He heard a gasp.

Whirling, he found a startled girl framed in the open bathroom door, still dripping from the tub, her long red hair dark with dampness. Her wide eyes as green as Snowfire's, she was not Lylik's mother.

3.

After one breath-taken moment, the woman laughed.

"No Name!" She made no move to cover herself. "I was expecting someone else." She glanced swiftly at the other door. "What are you after?"

"I was looking for Lylik's mother."

"You won't find her here." Her cool green gaze came back to him. "I thought you were learning to be a Benefactor."

"I was." He eyed her again with unwilling admiration. "You were under arrest, the last time I saw you."

"My luck is running better now." She made a possessive nod at everything around her. "I have a friend — and a new name of my own. If we happen to meet, don't call me Sapphire. Now I'm Diamond Dust."

"Fitting." He gave her a small ironic bow. "Your old friend Wheeler — where is he?"

"He too has discovered better luck. With another name to match. Squaremark. He's a banker."

"He's a crook —"

"We've all had our troubles." Her eyes narrowed, probing him. "I suppose you're here with Counterkill. Even so, you have no business in my room. I'll make a bargain with you." She smiled in a way he remembered bitterly. "You'll forget Sapphire and Wheeler. I'll forget that you were here."

With a painful grin, he shook his head.

"I know you too well. I couldn't trust your promise. I'm afraid I couldn't keep mine. Because I am with Counterkill."

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For an instant, her face looked dangerous.

"I can destroy you —" Suddenly, she smiled again, turning slowly in the doorway to display herself. "We're old friends. Perhaps you'll be back at a better time. If you survive the terror —"

Her head cocked to listen and her low voice died. Silently, she beckoned him into the closet. He returned to Lylik's room, relocking the doors behind him. When he opened the corridor door, he found a squat green female planted outside, a silent sentry. He retreated, to reflect again upon the dark plight of the house of Nggar.

Nggongga's rotation was slower than Xyr's. No longer used to thirty-hour days, he had fallen into an uneasy sleep before Snowfire called him. She had changed into a clinging crimson sheath that accented her hair and eyes in a way that made him wonder if she had already met Nggar's other green-eyed guest. His silent guardian was gone.

"You'll be meeting the people who hired us." She was guiding him down a great stair toward a lower floor. With no audience for her game of young love, she was now crisply impersonal. "Friends of Nggar's, who have been threatened by the terrorists.

"Yava Yar comes from another rich foundation family. One brother owns mines. Another has airways and factories. He's an astronomer — the one who found the cometary dust cloud. He showed it to us last night, with a little telescope Nggar's son built.

"Longbridge is a churchman. An otherworlder, as you'd guess from the name. Head of the All Worlds Mission. The terrorists dislike him because his church is uprooting the native faiths. He doesn't believe in Cru Creetha.

"The third man is Squaremark —"

He almost missed a step.

"Another otherworlder," she went on. "A banker. He has made an enormous new fortune, speculating in muskweed and the exported perfume made from it. The terrorists seem to feel that he's exploiting the native muskweed industry."

He followed her into a huge dim room massively furnished with Nggonggan antiques. One gloomy alcove was filled with racked manguns and grinning trophy heads. Nggar came limping across the tly-wing patterns of a fine old Sand clan carpet, to escort them to the heavy table where Clayman sat facing three troubled men.

In his voiceless rasp, Nggar introduced them.

Yava Yar was a short brown man, evidently of mixed ancestry. His small dark eyes were darting

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everywhere, at Snowfire and Blacklantern, at Clayman, at the two men beside him, as if in tormented apprehension.

Longbridge looked too pale and lean and tall for Nggongga. He must have come, Blacklantern thought, from a world with a cooler sun and weaker gravity. His hollowed eyes had a remote, unseeing stare, as if fixed on unpleasant things beyond.

Squaremark — once called Wheeler — was flabby and shapeless and gray. His bulging, glassy eyes rested on Blacklantern with no hint of recognition.

Clayman sat bolt upright across the table from them, his hands and arms and hairless head all smeared white with suncream. Masked behind the opaque multiscopic lenses, he looked more mechanical than human.

"Blacklantern is a native Nggonggan." Completing his introductions, Nggar smiled with half his face. "He has been trained for the arena and trained to be a Benefactor. Perhaps he can help us locate the hiding Sun Lighter."

He waved Snowfire and Blacklantern to chairs beside Clayman. Bending painfully, he opened a safe hidden under the table and sat up to show a heavy little device the size of his fist.

"This was tossed through my bedroom window last night," his strained whisper hissed. "As you see, it didn't operate. In the light from the room, I glimpsed the thing that threw it. The god Cru Creetha, as the native fanatics describe him. A huge black head, with blazing red eyes and snaky metal tentacles."

Voiceless, his sardonic laugh rattled like dry gravel.

"Actually, a remote manipulator."

"A proxy box," Clayman agreed. "Common enough on advanced planets. Used for work too hazardous for men. I'm surprised to find one here."

"Can you trace the control signals?" Nggar asked. "To locate the master station?"

"Probably not." Clayman shook his white-plastered head. "The beam would be tight and shielded. In use only briefly. We couldn't hope to intercept it."

Nggar pushed the fist-sized device across the table to him. "Does this tell you anything?"

"A modified ejector circuit." Clayman turned it in chalk-white hands, his blank lenses whining. "Modified to make an implosion bomb. Expertly done, by a workman who understands transflection technology. Fortunately the detonator jammed — damaged, probably, when the device struck the window."

"That's how close I've come." The hoarse whisper quivered. "But

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we're all in the same danger."

Nggar looked along the table, at the restless little astronomer, the far-staring churchman, the impassive banker. None of them spoke.

"This terror is — intolerable!" His dry wheeze had a savage force. "With Sunsdeath upon us, we're desperate." With a pause to recover himself, he twisted painfully to give Clayman a stiff Nggonggan bow. "Counterkill is our one hope. We've met your terms — costly as you are. We'll do anything you advise."

"Before we start, we need information," Clayman's audible syllables clinked like coins. "We can't act without facts."

"You'll have to find the facts," Nggar whispered. "We've failed. Sun Lighter has too many friends. There are two hundred million blacks on the planet. Every one enjoys ten times more than the clan chiefs did, before the portal opened. Yet I suppose most of them feel they have been somehow robbed or wronged by other-worlders. There has always been a secret war against us. Just look at me."

A withered hand lifted to his blighted face.

"I was a whole man once. Being the heir of a foundation family, I had to try my luck in the arena. I was tly-stung. A tragic accident — but not entirely accidental. My tly had not been properly milked of its venom. The handler who failed to milk it was a black who didn't love me."

The live half of his face twitched with pain.

"I should have died — but I suppose there are blacks who enjoy each tormented breath I draw. When I was young, such events were rare. Year by year, the war has grown more open and more grim. Two years ago, I had to send my son away — to what I thought was safety. Last year my wife was crippled hopelessly."

"Now, Sunsdeath!" Little Yava Yar was abruptly on his feet, too nervous to sit. "Something more than a silly superstition. I'll show you the cometary dust cloud which obscures our star on some of its returns. Sun Lighter and his fanatics have made it a signal for the blacks to rise. The end of civilization on Nggongga. Unless —"

"Unless we defeat the terror." Clayman looked up and down the table. "We expect to win, but we do require your aid."

His whirring lenses settled on the anxious astronomer.

"Yava Yar, you can help deflate the panic." Though the words were courteous, the audible tone was coldly commanding. "Invite the media to observe the dust cloud. Convince the people that this eclipse is a natural thing."

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"I — I tried to announce my discovery." Yava Yar stammered fearfuly. "People won't believe. The street fanatics threaten me with the wrath of Cru Creetha."

"Speak out," his hard tone rang. "You're fighting for your life."

Clayman's blank stare moved on to the churchman.

"Respected Longbridge, you will join this effort. Instruct your clergymen to explain the eclipse. Ask them to pray for compassion and peace."

"We have done so," Longbridge said. "The terrorists have burned our missions."

Clayman looked at the banker, who sat hunched in his chair, rubbing at his puffy jaw.

"Respected Squaremark, you will offer rewards for information. Generous rewards. For the taking of any terrorist. For any fact to help us find the hiding leader."

The banker grunted and inclined his head. Blacklantern caught the stale salt taint on his breath, and knew that he had been triggering a narcotic implant.

"Respected Nggar —" Clayman swung again. "You will provide supplies and support, as the need arises."

"Done."

"That's our part." The gaunt churchman's stare came suddenly back from nowhere, to rest darkly and briefly in turn upon Snowfire, Blacklantern, and Clayman. "What is yours?"

"To fight the terror, we must first find the terrorists." Clayman glanced down at the glinting metal and yellow plexoid of the bomb. "This is the only clue you have given us. The missing Sun Lighter is the only suspect you have named. I understand he has been in hiding for years. If you want action, tell me how to hit him."

Before his humming lenses, the table was silent. The banker massaged his jaw. Yava Yar bobbed up and sat down again. The churchman looked back into his own dark infinity. Nggar twitched and quivered, as if to a spasm of pain.

Blacklantern spoke. "I can look for him," he offered. "I used to see him begging on the streets. He had a friend — a man who sometimes filled his bowl — who might know where he went."

Hope rustled around the table.

"Who?" Nggar bent painfully forward. "Who's the friend?"

"I never knew his name. An old man, who had lost a leg in the tly arena. A tourist guide —"

"Old Champ!" Nggar wheezed. "I knew him around the arena long ago, though he's no friend. It was his brother who should have milked the tly that stung me."

"No matter," Clayman rapped.

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"Where is he now?"

"Retired. Gone to Krongkor — that's an old Sea clan city. I believe he owns a hotel there. The Pilgrims Rest. I used to stay there when I was buying muskweed. I can tell him, but I expect no favors."

"We'll see him," Clayman snapped. "We can persuade him."

Nggar offered a flyer, and Clayman mapped their strategy. He would be journalist, doing a Sunsdeath story. Snowfire would be his pilot, and they would leave at once. Blacklantern felt cheered to have a plan for action, but Snowfire called him and Clayman aside as they left the hall.

"I'm afraid we're on a false trail." Her voice was hushed and troubled. "That old native priest may hate otherworlders bitterly enough. But I don't think he'd have the use of remote manipulators and implosion bombs."

"We're fighting paradoxes." Staring blankly, Clayman shrugged off her objection. "Perhaps the Night clan priests have learned to fight technology with technology, as we fight terror with terror. In any case, we must follow the trail. It's the only one we have."

A mute green woman escorted them up a long stair. When they climbed into the night, Snowfire gasped with awe. The moonless sky was alive with streaks of vivid fire, blazing and fading, all radiant from a point in the north.

"Meteors!" shouted Yava Yar, who had followed up the stairs with Longbridge. "From the swarm around the cosmic dust cloud. We're already in its fringes." He beckoned them toward the small telescope that must have been Lylik's, on a railed platform beyond the air pad. "Come along, if you want to see the cloud."

Snowfire had climbed into the little flyer. She was inspecting the controls. Blacklantern and Clayman stood outside, watching the meteor-fall. Twenty yards away, Yava Yar and Longbridge approached the telescope. A green woman started from the stairwell, with Clayman's heavy bag —

A deafening concussion slapped Blacklantern's ears. A hot gust brushed him. When he could hear again, the green woman was wailing strangely, running for the stair. Where the telescope had stood, there was only broken rubble. Yava Yar and Longbridge were gone.

4.

That cruel concussion left a frozen hush upon the roof platform. Soundless, the meteor needles still stabbed down the night sky. Nothing moved until Nggar came limping up the stair, followed by a handful of his green retainers. Circling the pit in the roof where

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the telescope had stood, he shuffled toward the flyer.

"Another implosion!" His crippled whisper shook. "We can guard the gates, but we can't stop that proxy box — which they must have used to plant the bomb." He stared at Clayman. "What are we to do?"

"Find Sun Lighter." Clayman's audible voice crackled with confidence. "Recover the rest of the bombs — eight of the missing devices are yet to be accounted for. Smash the terror group. Trust Counterkill!"

They took off.

Blacklantern had an eerie sensation of escape. All he could hear was a muffled rush of air. The dark compound dropped away, and they climbed into the silent wonder of the firefall. Snowfire sat quiet beside him, the light of the meteors dancing on her ivory loveliness. For a moment he felt that they had risen out of terror, into a world of winking splendor.

But his head still rang from that near implosion, and Clayman sat close behind them, that new mangun under his cloak, watching everything. The terror flew with them.

Snowfire's silent presence tantalized him. He thought she looked too clean and fine for Counterkill, with none of Clayman's ruthless coldness. If anything had ever wounded her, as Lylik's killing had wounded him, she showed no scars. He wanted to penetrate her cool reserve, to learn what she was and why she was here, but, caught before Clayman's humming lenses, he could say nothing.

The flight was brief. They dropped out of the blazing sky, toward the fainter lights of old Krongkor. Snowfire set them on the new airpad built above the old hotel. They emerged into a cool dank sea scent, and unhurried blacks escorted them down into a monumental lobby. Champ had been out on his beach, watching the meteor storm. At sight of Blacklanter, his seamed face lit.

"The nameless challenger! I was in the stands, the day you were tly-stung." His dark eyes sharpened. "Are you already a Benefactor?"

"I'm afraid I'll never be."

Blacklantern turned to present Snowfire and Clayman.

"I'm an interworld mediaman," Clayman announced. "I'm here to do the Nggonggan story. I know the otherworlders and I've met the foundation families. Now I want to see the black side."

"I'm black." Champ had met ten thousand egotistic tourists, and he didn't look impressed. "Look at me."

The dark lenses whirred, blindly peering.

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"I'm searching out the secret soul of black Nggongga," Clayman boomed, his loud audible voice as smooth as oil. "Now, with Sunsdeath coming, I want to explore the hopes and terrors related to it. I believe the old Night clan shaman is still alive. I hope you can help me find him."

"Sun Lighter?" Astonished, the old man swung to Blacklantern. "You're looking for Sun Lighter?"

"I used to see you filling his bowl," Blacklantern said. "I told the respected Clayman you had been his friend."

"I knew him." Champ swung on his good leg to study Clayman's white-painted strangeness. With an inquiring side glance at Snowfire, he shrugged and continued, "But he has gone home."

"Where's that?"

"Brongeel. A sacred place of the Night clan." Reserved at first, the old man spoke with growing animation, almost as if he were escorting tourists again. "In the legends of the clan, it was the nest of the monster gods. Cru Creetha was hatched there. But the first fathers of the Night clan killed his monster mother and purified the spot, so that he can never return — unless he is able to destroy Sun Lighter and bring back the everlasting dark."

"Do you know where Brongeel is?"

"I used to guide tourists to the old ruins of the old holy city. It's below the equator, in the highlands of our dry hemisphere. In a region too dry for muskweed, or even for wild tlys and nearmen. The priests used to live on the pilgrims who came to beg them to keep the sun alive."

"Can you guide us there?"

"I'm retired." Champ moved one thin black hand in a native gesture of weary negation. "The old pilgrim trails are gone — so are the pilgrims. The night clan cult was almost dead, even before the otherworlder astronomers and preachers came through the portal to break our old beliefs. Besides, I think Sun Lighter would have no time for visitors now. When he saw Sunsdeath coming, he went home to be ready. He'll be at work tomorrow, fighting Cru Creetha and restoring the sun."

"That's what I want to see," Clayman urged. "We'll pay well."

Champ waved a firm refusal.

"What of the new Cru Creetha?" Hopefuly, Blacklantern tried another angle. "The one who is haunting Nggonggamba now, throwing implosion bombs and calling on the people to wash the streets with the blood of otherworlders?"

"I left the city to get away from that." Champ looked both puzzled and indignant. "It makes no sense

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to me — using otherworld inventions against otherworlders. But it is no work of the true Sun Lighter. He has no love for the gifts of the portal, but he's no terrorist."

"Many people think he is," Blacklantern objected. "If you would help the respected Clayman reach him, the truth might help us end panic and terror in Nggong-gamba."

Champ leaned on his yellow crutch, frowning solemnly.

"I'll show you the way," he decided at last. "But the distance is long and the landmarks are dim. We must wait for daylight."

Blacklantern was glad to stay. In the beginning, he had expected to meet the terrorists like tlys in the arena. If he was really violence prone, he needed a target to attack. With no visible opponent, he felt frustrated. The terror had become a baffling nightmare, the mystery of the Nggars a hopeless riddle he longed to forget.

After Clayman had gone upstairs, he sat with Snowfire in a long, high-ceilinged dining room that overlooked the beach. They ordered seafood. The waiter was elderly and slow, unalarmed by the rain of meteors toward the sea.

"Sunsdeath comes." He shrugged and refiled their glasses with dark sea-berry wine. "Perhaps the sun is eaten by a god. Perhaps it goes behind a cloud. No matter to me. I think the sun has winked before."

Snowfire liked the food and wine. She exclaimed at the dancing splendor in the sky. She asked about the dishes they were served, about muskweed trading and perfume making, about manguns and trophy hunts, about wild tlys and nearmen, about his own adventures in the arena.

At first he was slow to speak of himself, but her interest seemed genuine. It began to excite him. Even though he had been born nameless and clanless on his backward planet, even though he was black, she accepted him. As they finished the wine, he felt excited again with the game of young love she had played when she met him, and suddenly he hoped to make it real.

Yet he had learned on Xyr that customs of sex and marriage differed vastly in different cultures. Afraid of anger or laughter, he asked again how she came to be in Counterkill.

"A long story." She rose abruptly to leave the table. "Too long for tonight."

In the corridor upstairs he tried to kiss her. She slipped away from him, green eyes wide. Yet she smiled at his look of dismay and turned back to touch his forehead with one golden finger. Before he could learn what that gesture

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meant, she was gone into her room.

With daybreak the meteors vanished, though the sky had a copper-colored dustiness. The same calm and ancient black served their breakfast.

"Perhaps the sun winks today." The windows were open, and he nodded almost casually at the ominous sky. "Perhaps it does not. Either way, men must eat." He shrugged. "The fish is a fresh catch, sir."

When Champ was ready, they boarded the flyer. He sat with Snowfire in the forward seat to show her the way. On his last trip to Brongeel, he told them, he had been with otherworld anthropologists, digging up sites along the old pilgrim trail and among the ruins of the holy city itself. He had been a young man then, with two good legs.

They flew south from the sea, over the dark-green fingers of watered valleys, over the wooded coastal range, over vast brown highlands dotted here and there with clumps of purple muskweed, over dry salt lakes and red clay hills.

The dust storms of centuries had erased the actual roads. His landmarks were the bend of a dry canyon, the shape of a white salt pan, the outline of a distant peak. Lost, once, he had Snowfire circle lower until he found his bearings.

Clayman raised a partition behind the forward seat. Leaning back as if to sleep, he whispered harshly to Blacklantern:

"Listen! We must be ready for action. First, perhaps, against the black. If he moves when I pull my gun, you cut his throat."

He slipped a long dagger into Blacklantern's hand.

The empty land slid back beneath, until a black cindercone like a volcanic islet rose from a sea of yellow sand ahead. Champ pointed. Snowfire rapped on the partition. When Clayman sat up to open it, she said the mountain was Brongeel.

The dagger had become so hot and heavy in Blacklantern's sweaty clutch that he began to doubt that he was really violence prone. Watching for signs that the terrorists' stronghold would be defended, he saw none. No lasers stabbed them, no missiles met them, no shells exploded.

Circling the old volcano, they flew across the time-shattered walls and sand-drowned domes of the old temple town. At a signal from Clayman, Snowfire brought them down inside the broken crater.

Even then, he saw no sign of man till old Champ pointed out a squat black tower, crudely built of mortared lava blocks on the farther rim. A spiral path wound around it to the top.

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"The holy spot." Champ sounded wearily ironic. "We've reached the womb of all creation. All life springs from here. When the sun must be rekindled, Sun Lighter climbs to the altar and burns three sacrifical sticks."

"Is this all?" Lenses whining as the focus changed, Clayman was peering about the crater, looking for the master station that controlled the remote manipulator, for the hidden arsenal that still held eight implosion bombs. "Isn't anybody here?"

"There." Champ pointed. "The holy family."

They came out of a cave in a lava cliff. A thin old man stumbling blindly over the rocks, a dirty bandage around his head. A tattered black woman, holding his arm to guide him. A naked boy, who clung to the woman's other hand.

"Are you sure?" Clayman hissed. "Is that Sun Lighter?"

"An old friend." Champ was reaching for his crutch, preparing to leave the flyer. "He was still the holy child, when I brought the anthropologists here. That was before he had to give his eyes —"

"Quiet!" Clayman snapped.

With a nod at Blacklantern, he slid his window down. His mangun rattled. The blind man staggered. The woman shrieked. The naked boy tried to run. All three crumpled.

"Why?" Snowfire gasped. "Why do that?"

Clayman's gun swung toward the forward seat. Trembling, Blacklantern gripped the dagger. He saw Champ touch the yellow crutch, saw him freeze.

"I fight terror," Clayman rapped. "I don't take chances."

His gun gestured at Blacklantern.

"Get out. Look for implosion devices."

Shaken, Blacklantern climbed out into furnace heat. He crossed incandescent sand to the lava cliff. Beneath a narrow ledge, he found a dwelling — a pile of filthy rags, a few bits of dried fruit and meat in a battered metal pot, a brown leather bag that held a worn fire-drill and three dry sticks.

There were no implosion bombs.

When he came out of the cave, the sky had begun to change. All around the horizon, the copper dust had darkened to the color of the sun's blood, shed in the mythic battle with Cru Creetha. Overhead, it was purple-blue.

The sunlight in the lava cup was pale as Xyr's moonlight, its heat gone. He stopped to form a pinhole with his fingers, to cast the sun's image on the sand. Half its disk had disappeared.

Plodding slowly back toward the plane, he paused beside the

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holy family. Sun Lighter lay face upward. For the last time, his wide blind eyes gazed at the sky. His blood stained the yellow sand, queerly blue in the failing light. Flies buzzed around him.

"— grateful, I think." He heard Champ's voice, oddly quiet. "He had no real believers left. If there are Night clan people in Nggonggamba now, they never followed him. I think he knew long ago that he would never live to light the sun. Bullets, I think, are kinder than starvation."

Clayman shouted at Blacklantern, asking what he had found.

"Nothing."

The mangun swung, to beckon him aboard.

"So this is Counterfkill?" He stood beside the dead family, quivering with a hot contempt for Clayman and himself. "I once thought we had a worthy cause. But we've done nothing —" His sick eyes fell to the dead family. "Except to cross half a world of desert and kill three harmless people. We're red-handed fools!"

5.

They touched down twice again before they left Brongeel. On the black altar tower whose fires had burned to rekindle the sun. On wind-rippled sand beneath a shattered dome in what had been a temple court. They found no master station, no bombs, nothing else alive.

The sun by then was a thinning reddened ember, so pale they could look directly at it. The purple night around it was falling toward the strange-hued horizon, and a sudden wind whipped dust around the broken columns.

"So we lost one toss." Clayman's flat cold voice held no audible regret. "We may win the next."

He moved to the forward seat before they took off, and ordered Snowfire to fly straight to Nggonggamba. In the rear seat with Champ, Blacklantern tried and failed to wash the blind staring image of the dead Sun Lighter out of his mind.

Since Clayman had dropped his journalistic mask, Champ had been told about Counterkill and informed that knowing made him a member, willy-nilly, under Clayman's command. He took the situation philosophically, as if he had seen too many otherworlder follies to be upset by anything.

"If I were hunting terrorists, I wouldn't be shooting ignorant blacks." He offered Blacklantern a saltflower seed, crunched one himself, chewed contemplatively. "I'd look for a clever city man. An interworlder, maybe. A money pirate looking for the loot he can find on worlds like Nggongga."

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"A man like Squaremark?" Blacklantern speculated. "I knew him when his name was Wheeler. He was selling illegal implant drugs and fixing tly fights." Bitterness edged his voice. "I might have been an arena champ myself, but for him."

"But his money's paying us." An expressionless robot in his thick white suncream, Clayman twisted to look back. "Perhaps he had an unfortunate past, but he's a respected banker now."

"I can tell you how he got his money," the old man answered. "I got the story from the gossip of the muskweed dealers who put up at my hotel. He robbed Nggar."

"Impossible!" Clayman sniffed. "They're still friends."

"Perhaps Nggar doesn't know who hit him." With a quiet relish, Champ licked his purple lips. "The theft was cunning. Even the muskweed dealers don't know how it was done."

"What was stolen?"

"A priceless secret," Champ said. "A way of making perfume. The Sand clan chiefs had always been perfumers, before the portal opened. The art was their great treasure. The first Nggar got it when he married the daughter of a chief.

"He built his fortune on the essence and passed it to his son. Other clever otherworlders tried to analyze and imitate it, but they never quite succeeded. With the secret, the Nggars were masters of the muskweed industry and the kings of all perfumers.

"Till Squaremark got the essence!"

Champ rubbed his lips with a handkerchief, and the sharp sweetness of his spittle began to fill the flyer.

"Squaremark keeps under cover," he added. "There are native agents who buy the weed — with funds borrowed from his bank. There is an interworld syndicate that makes and sells the essence — and his bank owns the syndicate."

"A wild accusation," Clayman snorted. "I see no proof."

"I have none," Champ admitted. "Just muskweed talk."

"You haven't connected Squaremark with the terror," Clayman persisted. "He may have been unethical, but he is still an otherworlder. What could he hope to gain by turning the blacks against his own kind?"

"We're only talking." Champ shrugged. "But I think Squaremark brought a habit of using terror when he came to Nggongga. From the time the syndicate got into the business, Nggar's buyers have been ambushed in the desert. His waterholes have been poisoned. His ricks of curing weed have been burned. He had to turn his own

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compound into a fortress and send his son away to Xyr. His wife was murdered —"

"Murdered?" Blacklantern echoed. "I thought she was only hurt."

"Killed," Champ said. "By explosives planted in their flyer. About the time the son was sent away. That was when Nggar locked out his own blacks, because he didn't trust them, and brought in his green dwarf slaves."

"He never told Lylik she was dead," Blacklantern muttered. "I wonder why?"

"A strange man." Champ wiped his purple mouth. "I hated him once. When we both were young braves about the tly arena. Still whole men. He was part white — and too proud of it. Sometimes nasty. Perhaps I was glad to see him stung."

His eyes rested on the darkened desert, where red-black shadows had begun to clot.

"I've pitied him since," he went on. "Because he has suffered too much. I would like to know how he came to lose the Sand clan essence."

"There's a girl —" Blacklantern leaned sharply forward. "Living with him now. She used to be with Squaremark, when his name was Wheeler. She's — she could have been beautiful. She has been a thief."

"What girl?" Clayman stared, lenses buzzing. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Her new name is Diamond Dust," he said. "I decided that Nggar's private life was none of my business."

"She's my business," Clayman grated. "I'll find what she's up to."

The unnatural dark grew denser, until meteors streaked the sky again with Cru Creetha's whiskers. Snowfire snapped a switch, as they neared Nggong-gamba, and a tight voice blasted from the cybernet:

"...sabotage! The portal is closed. Disorder is reported on the traffic ways. Though municipal authorities will not confirm rumors of an extremist plot to destroy the portal and massacre aliens, police are urging light-skinned individuals to avoid public places...."

Pillars of smoky flame stood here and there about the city. As they came down toward the Nggar compound, Blacklantern had a glimpse of passenger ways jammed with people in panic flight.

"Wait here!" Clayman rolled clumsily out of the flyer. "While I find Nggar and get the truth about this woman. If she has been a spy for Squaremark, I think we'll find the master station in the tower of his bank."

They waited. Nggar's green guards had disappeared. The dusty

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sweetness of cured muskweed drifted from the dark yard below, mixed with a bitter smoke reek. Shrill voices came faintly from the traffic way. Champ calmly chewed his seed. Snowfire sat very quiet; again he thought her too clean and fine to be involved in Counterkill —

He saw her start. Her mouth gaped open. She crouched back from the window of the flyer, pale hands lifted. Jumping out, he heard a descending roar in the meteor-needled sky. In a moment he found the proxy box, diving at them.

An armored oval, painted like that tly's egg in the shop with Cru Creetha's black-fanged grin. Two wide-spaced camera eyes, ringed with red lamps. Two manipulator arms hanging from it, one steel hand clutching the small bright implosion bomb.

He clutched for a weapon, but all he found was Clayman's useless dagger. Snowfire and Champ had scrambled out behind him, the girl unarmed, the old man waving his yellow crutch.

"Champ!" A great metal voice drummed from the fiery sky. "Your gift from Cru Creetha!"

The manipulator hurled the implosion device.

For an instant Blacklantern felt nakedly defenseless. If he had ever been violence prone, this was too much violence. But the twin lamps were flashing as red as the armor of a fighting tly; the black-and-yellow bomb came slashing down like a stabbing sting.

He vaulted past old Champ, as if to meet a diving tly. He reached to seize the sting. Very gently, yielding to the force of the falling bomb and letting its own mass move him, he pivoted and tossed it back. He saw it strike the black-fanged head.

The darkness winked and crashed.

A smoky gust struck him, and the proxy box was gone. His head ringing from the blast, he turned to lean against the flyer door. His knees were quivering. He saw Snowfire speaking, but he couldn't hear what she said.

Smiling palely, she bent to place one finger on his lips. Again he had to shake his head, wishing he understood the folkways of her world.

Clayman came back across the airpad at a stumbling run. He was breathing hard, gripping his mangun. His lenses whirred as if hunting for a focus in the flickering dimness.

"The bomb?" he panted. "What got hit?"

"The proxy box." Snowfire's voice came faintly through the roaring in his ears. "With its own bomb. Thanks to our Benefactor."

"But we're too late — too late to

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help Nggar." Clayman's lenses lifted toward the fire-bearded sky, and Blacklantern heard the quivering desperation beneath his stiff white mask. "Can't find him. Can't find the girl. Only those green slaves — some of them scared white — barricaded in a muskweed warehouse. They took a shot at me!"

He wheezed for his breath.

"Another implosion crater. Down in the freight yard. A hole in the wall of the perfume factory." The multiscopic glasses settled on Snowfire. "The way I see the picture, Squaremark and his girl were trying to escape. Alarmed, I think, by Counterkill. Nggar tried to stop them. They hit him with a bomb."

"I think I see a different picture." Blacklantern turned. "I think I can find Nggar — if we're quick enough."

Clayman muttered doubtfully, but followed him at Snowfire's urging. He ran down the stair, hurried through the echoing corridors of the vacant palace. His masked key-stirp let him into Lylik's old room, where he had stayed, unlocked the farther door.

He flung it open.

In Lylik's childhood playroom beyond, they found Nggar standing at a workbench beneath the hanging model spacecraft that Lylik must have built. On the live half of his scar-hardened face, shocked surprise became a sheepish grin.

"More terror than I can take!" His voiceless laugh rattled like dry seed in manskull pod. "When that last bomb crashed, I ran in here to hide."

"I know why you're here." He was shuffling toward the flight simulator built on the old study desk, and Blacklantern sprang to block his path. "This is your master station for the proxy boxes. You came in here to kill us."

"You can't think that!" Wildly, his mismatched eyes darted to Clayman, to Snowfire, back again to Blacklantern. "You're the terror-fighters I hired!"

"The riddle now is why you hired us." Blacklantern danced to keep him from the simulator. "Maybe you will tell us that?"

"I brought you here to stop the secret war that has been waged against me," his harsh whisper hissed. "We Nggars had been princes of Nggongga, owners of the muskweed trade, perfumers to the galaxy. For two years now, some unknown enemy has been killing my agents and burning my posts, stealing my secrets, harming my wife, murdering my son. I brought you here to defend me, not to make insane accusations."

His eyes rolled at Clayman.

"You left me naked here," his

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plaintive hiss went on. "Today I was robbed again — by a man I trusted and a woman I loved. Squaremark and Diamond Dust. I found the wall blown out of my strongroom. They're gone with a fortune in perfume. Into the desert or more likely through the portal before it closed. If you can catch them for me —"

"They're dead," Blacklantern broke in. "Killed. Like your wife and Lylik. You are the killer!"

"How can you imagine that?" His harsh whisper fell. "My son's best friend!"

"I didn't want to think it." Blacklantern shook his head. "But the facts are pretty plain."

"He's crazy!" He was scuttling painfully toward Clayman. "Dangerous! You're in command here. I order you to kill him."

Clayman retreated uncertainly toward the shelves of Lylik's old toys.

"We're employees," he muttered at last. "We were well paid. We have invaded a private room. Perhaps we have no business here." His mangun wavered toward Blacklantern. "Your accusation lacks any visible basis —"

Nggar's sound hand was creeping beneath his cooler cloak.

"Don't do it!"

Blacklantern swept the dagger back to throw and watched Nggar's twitching hand drop into view. In his peripheral vision, Snowfire's sudden movement was only a blur. Her voice held a cool force he had never heard in it before.

"Counterkill has changed command!"

When he glanced at her, she had Clayman's mangun. Clayman was staggering backward, still off balance.

"Another traitor!" Gasping with his startled fury, Clayman swung to Nggar. "Believe me, sir! I'm still loyal. Counterkill is loyal. Trust me to deal with this incredible treachery —"

"Quiet!"

He looked at Snowfire and stood still.

"You may speak." She nodded at Blacklantern with a new authority. "Make it brief."

"Nggar used to travel," Blacklantern said. "To peddle perfume. His story of his perfume war with Squaremark is probably half true. When the syndicate began to hurt him, he brought back the dwarf slaves and the proxy boxes and the ejector circuits. All three, I imagine, from the same construction site. He didn't know that Diamond Dust was Squaremark's spy, and he was pretty desperate. Built his master station in this room, out of Lylik's old flight simulator —"

"Liar!" Nggar crouched closer to Clayman. "Stop him!"

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"State your evidence," Snowfire commanded. "Keep it brief."

"When I found the girl here, I suspected Squaremark. I began to guess the rest today, when I learned that Nggar had lied about his wife's death. I wasn't sure till just now — when Clayman said he found the green slaves scared partly white."

"The man's insane!" Nggar hissed. "That makes no sense."

"A white dwarf killed Lylik. When I learned that Nggar's slaves were sometimes white, that finished the picture. A master station here couldn't operate a proxy box on Xyr. When Nggar wanted to kill Lylik, he had to send a dwarf to carry the bomb. A dwarf somehow bleached —"

"Natural, more likely," Snowfire said. "I believe the green is an artificial pigmentation, against the sunlight here."

"Lunatics!" Nggar clutched at Clayman's chalky arm. "Why should I kill my own son?"

"Because he was coming home," Blacklantern said. "Because you had to keep him from discovering that you had murdered his mother. I suppose she objected to Diamond Dust, and you put her out of the way?"

Nggar swayed away from Clayman, shaking his blighted head.

"Monstrous nonsense!" His unmatched eyes rolled toward Snowfire. "You're still sane. You can't believe such flimsy lies. Look — look at the holes in the story! There were no implosion bombs before I employed Counterkill. If you want the true terror-master — there he is!"

His sound arm thrust toward Clayman.

"We're no dupes!" Clayman plunged at him, glasses buzzing. "If you hired me for a sacrificial fool —"

Clayman's dagger flashed.

Nggar reached beneath his cloak.

Darkness flickered.

Groggily, Blacklantern sat up. His head ached and a fading gong rang in his ears. His mouth was salt with blood, the air sharp with dust. Lylik's old toys and the wreckage of Nggar's master station lay scattered around him. Broken beams fringed a dark crater in the floor, where Nggar and Clayman had stood.

He looked for Snowfire, but he was alone. Both doors had been blown in. The rush of air must have carried her into the ejection field, he thought, into some unknowable void beyond visible space.

Desolation fell upon him, as cruel as that abrupt implosion. Now he could never discover what sort of world she came from, or how she had been trapped in the savage madness of Counterkill, or why she

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had acted her role of lover with such exciting zeal. Now they could never really love, and he felt a deep ache of loss —

Sounds broke faintly through the roaring in his ears. Lights flickered over the wreckage. Turning dully, he saw men in uniform. They pushed into the shattered playroom, peering at everything, calling to him, pointing into that dark pit.

They tried to lift him into a stretcher. He pushed them away, stood up unsteadily. He staggered again when he saw Snowfire.

Blood had oozed from a scratch on her chin, but she looked alert and well. He swayed toward her, trying clumsily to take her in his arms. She caught his hand to keep him from falling. Gravely, she put one finger on his lips. He saw her speaking, but all he heard was the din in his ears. A black policeman tried to help him toward the splintered doorway, but he stood fast, holding to her.

Other men searched the demolished room and came back to her with empty hands. He saw a black officer shouting to her.

"No bombs left." Faintly, now, he caught the words. "All ejected. The end of the terror." The man gave them both a formal Nggonggan bow. "Thanks to you Benefactors."

Startled, he peered at her.

"Yes, I am a planetary fellow." Her voice came through the ringing, still whisper-thin. "When we learned about Counterkill, I was asked to infiltrate it. For all of Clayman's talk, I think his cell was the only one. We're done with Counterkill."

He had leaned to listen, and she bent closer to help him hear.

"Your mentors on Xyr told me you were violence prone." She gave him an odd small smile. "If that was ever true, I think Nggar and Counterkill have cured you. I think you've proved that you're a fine potential Benefactor. If you like, I'll ask Thornwall to restore your preparatory fellowship."

He swayed unsteadily from the impact of that; again he had to wave away the men with the stretcher. Her voice was clearer now, and a bright hint of her sweetleaf scent was mixed with the stinging smoke and dust.

"I'd like that," he told her. "Very much!"

When he felt like walking, they left the imploded room and climbed back into the fire-needled night. They found old Champ impatient to get home. When the police were done, they flew him back to Krongkor.

The meteor streaks had begun to fade before they landed, and a rose-colored patch was growing in the west, around a faint red spark

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of the rekindled sun. The roaring was gone by then, and he could hear the husky softness of Snowfire's voice when they sat again in the old high-beamed dining room with a bottle of Champ's tangy wine.

Alone with her, he felt his pulse quicken. Yet, when he leaned eagerly to exchange their wine glasses, she merely looked perplexed. The Nggonggan signal meant nothing to her, and he had a sudden painful sense of the wide gulf between their cultures.

Her expectant smile puzzled him.

"Of course you had to be mysterious." Hopefully, he sipped the glass that had been hers, set it back before her. "But now, with Clayman gone —"

He faltered again, afraid of losing her. If she had been a wildly, he thought, he would know better how to act. Yet, when he looked up, her green eyes told him to go on.

"You're still a mystery," he whispered. "I want to know about your world and you. About your customs and your language and your gestures." He moved a hesitant finger toward her mouth. "What does this mean?"

"Nothing alarming." Laughing, she leaned to touch his lips again. "In matters of love, our ways are not so rigid as yours. As a woman, I enjoy more freedoms than the clans of Nggongga allow. The touch is an invitation."

They went upstairs together.

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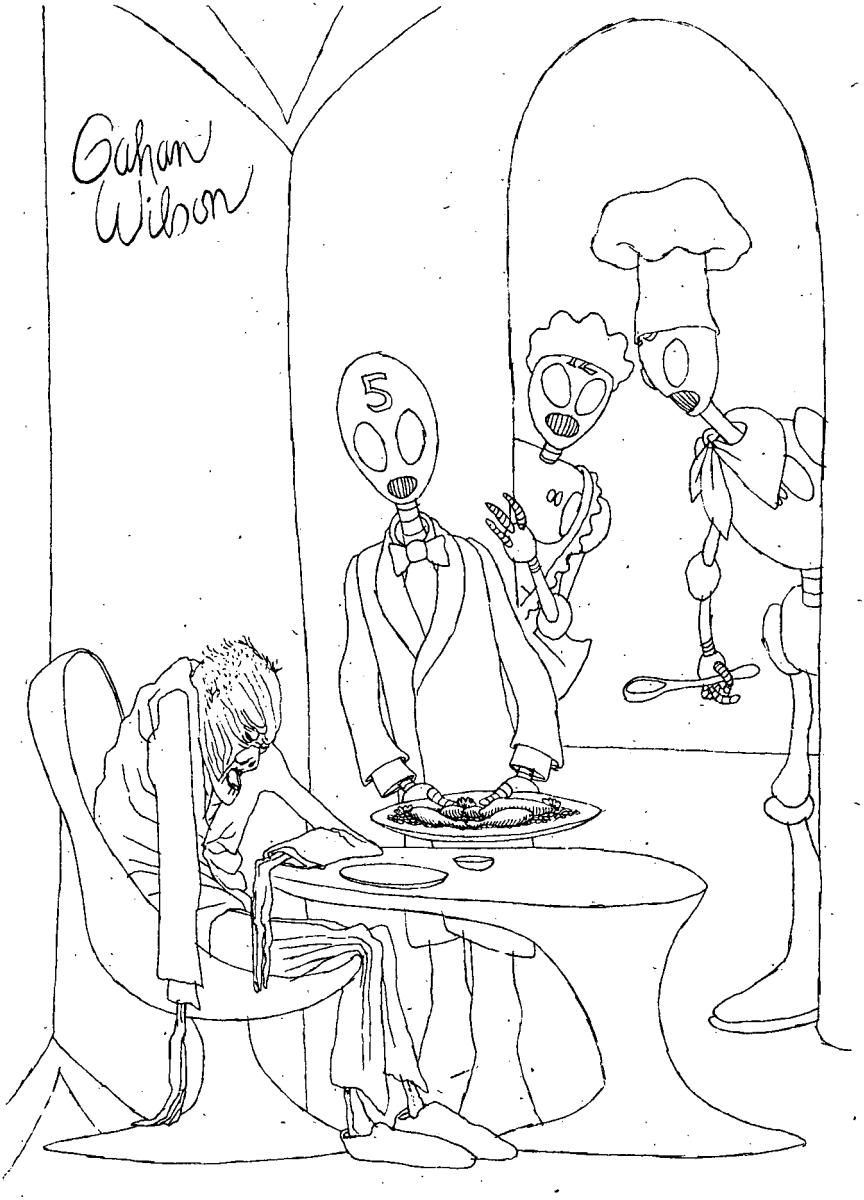


*"He hasn't touched a thing for weeks!"*



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## THE THIRD LIQUID

A few nights ago, I had occasion (not entirely of my own volition) to be present at a very posh apartment on Manhattan's East Side where a sit-down dinner for twenty was being given under conditions of elegance to which I am entirely unaccustomed.

I was at one of the three tables, and, as a quasi-celebrity, I was questioned concerning my work. I answered the inevitable question, "Are you writing anything now?" with the equally inevitable, "Yes, of course." That is, and must be, my answer on any hour of any day of these last thirty years.

The hostess said, "And what are you writing today?"

"Today," I said, "I am writing my monthly column for *American Way*, the in-flight magazine of American Airlines."*

"Oh?" said she, politely. "And what does the column deal with?"

"The overall title of the column-series is *Change*," I said, "and each article deals with some aspect of the future as I see it."

She all but clapped her hands in glee, and said, "Oh, you foresee the

**Alas, I am not a monogamous writer. My F & SF pieces do not represent my only monthly column. Forgive me!*

ISAAC ASIMOV

# Science

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future! You believe in astrology!"

For a moment I was taken aback, and then I said, sternly, "I do *not* believe in astrology."

Everyone at the table (each of whom was a quasi-intellectual in order, I presume, to match my position as quasi-celebrity) turned to me in horror and cried out in disbelief, "You don't believe in astrology?"

"No," I said, even more sternly. "I don't."

So I was ignored for the rest of the meal, while the others competed with each other in an effort to see which one could intellectualize most quasily. It was a grim evening.

You will not blame me, Gentle Reader, if I do not, then, allow this article to deal with the planets, as four of the last five have, in order to avoid even the distant suggestion of astrological thinking. I will, instead, turn to another favorite subject of mine — the chemical elements.

There are 105 elements known today, and eleven of them are gases at the temperatures to which we are accustomed in our everyday affairs. Six of them are the noble gases: helium, neon, argon, krypton, xenon, and radon. The other five are the more or less ignoble gases: hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, fluorine, and chlorine.

Of the remaining 94 elements, exactly two are usually listed as liquid.

One of these is the metal, mercury, which has been known since ancient times. As the only metal to be liquid at ordinary temperatures (and a particularly dense metal, too) it was an impressive substance to the early chemists who suspected it to be a key to the transmutation of the elements.*

Other liquids were known (water, turpentine, olive oil), but no other liquid element was discovered until 1824, when a French chemist, Antoine Jerome Balard, discovered a red-brown liquid, more or less by accident, while extracting substances from plants growing in a salt marsh.

Whereas mercury boils at 356.6 C. and gives off little vapor at room temperature, the new liquid element boils at 58.8 C. and at the temperature of a warm day (25 C. or 77 Fahrenheit) produces a vapor which is very noticeable, since it is reddish in color. A stoppered bottle of clear glass, half full of the liquid, is red all the way up.

The vapor has a strong odor, which is usually described as disagreeable, and so the element was named from the Greek word

**I discuss mercury in some detail in THE SEVENTH METAL (F & SF, January, 1968).*

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"bromos" meaning "stench." The element is "bromine."

Reaction to smells is subjective. I, myself, find the smell of bromine strong and not exactly pleasant, but I do not find it disagreeable and certainly do not consider it a stench. Nevertheless, I do not smell it voluntarily, for bromine is an extremely active element, and its vapor will irritate and damage those parts of the body with which it comes in contact.

Whereas mercury freezes at -38.9 C., bromine freezes at -7.2 C. A cold winter's day in New York will suffice to freeze bromine, but it would take a cold winter's day in North Dakota or Alaska to freeze mercury.

This demonstrates the subjectivity of defining elements as solids, liquids and gases. If the customary temperature at which we lived were -10 C., we'd feel that mercury was the only liquid element while bromine would seem to us to be an easily-melted solid. If the customary temperature was -35 C., there'd be two liquid elements because mercury would still be liquid, and chlorine (to us a gas) would have liquefied. At -45 C. there would be no liquid elements, but at lower temperatures still, radon would liquefy, and so on.

In order to make sense, then, of the subject matter of this article, let's define a liquid element as one that is liquid at 25 C., which is a little on the warm side, but is a common enough temperature in New York City, for instance.

With that settled, and leaving mercury and bromine to one side, what are the nearest misses to liquidity in the rest of the list of elements?

The near misses might be those of gaseous elements that don't quite liquefy at 25 C, or solid elements that don't quite melt. In the first group, there are no really near misses. Of the gaseous elements, the one with the highest liquefying point is chlorine, which manages to become liquid at -34.6 C, some sixty degrees below 25 C. It has probably never been cold enough in New York (in historic times, anyway) to liquefy chlorine.

In the second group we can do better. There is gallium, for instance, a solid metal, silvery in appearance when pure, which has a melting point at 29.8 C. This is less than five degrees above 25 C. and is equivalent to 85.6 Fahrenheit, so that it would be liquid on a hot day in July in New York — and would in fact be liquid at body temperature, and would melt in one's hand.*

**I discuss gallium in some detail in THE PREDICTED METAL (F & SF, February, 1968).*

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Yet we can do better than that — but let me begin at the beginning.

It was discovered in ancient times that if plants were burned and the ashes were mixed with water, a substance would be dissolved in the water which could then be recovered, when the water was evaporated. The substance was useful in preparing such substances as soap and glass. Since the ash-extract was usually evaporated in a large pot, the resultant substance was called "potash" in straightforward English.

The Arabs, who were the chemists par excellence in the Middle Ages, called it "al-quili" in straightforward Arabic, since that meant "the ashes." European chemists borrowed many of the Arabic terms when they translated Arabic books on chemistry, so that potash became an example of an "alkali."

Some seashore plants produced an ash that yielded something similar to potash, but not identical with it, something that was even better for making soap and glass. The Arabs called this ash "natron," adopting that from an earlier Greek term "nitron." The Arabs must have used natron as a headache remedy (for it neutralized excess acid in the stomach without too badly damaging it). Since their word for a splitting headache was "suda," that came to be applied to the substance, and the word became "soda" in Europe.

Both potash and soda are carbonates of certain metals which were unknown prior to 1800 because those metals were so active and clung to other elements so tightly that they could not be isolated. In 1807, however, the English chemist, Humphry Davy, used an electric current to split those elements away from their compounds and obtained them in free form for the first time.

The metallic element of potash, he called "potassium," using the by then conventional suffix for a metallic element. The metallic element of soda, he called "sodium." The Germans, however, named the element of "alkali" (the alternate name for potash) "kalium," and the element of "natron" (the alternate name for soda) "natrium." What's more, the German influence in chemistry in the early nineteenth century was such that the international chemical symbols for those elements are taken from the German names, not the English. The symbol for potassium is "K" and for sodium is "Na" and that's that.

In English, potash is now more properly known as "potassium carbonate," while soda is "sodium carbonate." Both are considered alkalis, and the characteristic properties of the two substances (the ability

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to neutralize acids, for instance) are described as "alkaline." As for potassium and sodium, they are examples of "alkali metals," and they resemble each other closely.

Once chemists worked out the electronic structure of the atoms of the various elements, it could be seen why potassium and sodium so closely resembled each other. Each sodium atom contains eleven electrons distributed in three shells, which hold (reading outward from the atomic center) 2, 8, and 1 electrons, respectively. The potassium atom contains nineteen electrons distributed in four shells, 2, 8, 8, 1. In either case it is the outermost electrons that encounter the outermost electrons of other atoms during collisions and upon them, therefore, that chemical properties depend. It is the similarity in distribution of electrons that make the two elements so alike.

But other elements may have similar electron distributions, too, so that sodium and potassium need not be the only alkali metals.

In 1817, for instance, a Swedish chemist, Johan August Arfwedson, was analyzing a newly discovered mineral called "petalite." He obtained something from it which, from its properties, he thought might be sodium sulfate. The assumption that it was, however, raised the sum of the elements he had isolated to 105 percent of the weight of the mineral. He had located an element that was like sodium in its properties but that had to be lighter.

It was a new alkali metal, and because it came from a rocky mineral instead of from plant sources it was named "lithium," from the Latin word for "rock." The atom of lithium has only three electrons, distributed in two shells: 2 and 1.

In the 1850s, chemists developed the technique of identifying elements by heating them till they glowed and then measuring the wavelengths of the light produced. Each element produced a series of wavelengths that could be separated and measured in a spectroscope, and no two elements produced identical wavelengths. Once you identified the wavelengths produced by every known element, you could be sure that any wavelength that was not on the list represented an element hitherto undiscovered.

The first to make use of spectroscopy for the purpose of mineral analysis were the German chemist Robert Wilhelm Bunsen and the German physicist Gustav Robert Kirchhoff. In 1860, Bunsen and Kirchhoff heated material obtained from a certain mineral water known to contain compounds of sodium, potassium, and lithium. They noted a

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bright blue line with a wavelength not matching those produced by any known element. It meant a new element, and they called it "cesium" from the Latin word "caesius" meaning "sky blue." (The British call the element "caesium," which is closer to the Latin but which adds only a misguiding letter as far as pronunciation is concerned.)

A few months later, in 1861, Bunsen and Kirchhoff analyzed a mineral known as "lepidolite" and discovered a deep red line that was not on the lists. Another new element — and they named it "rubidium" from the Latin word for "deep red."

As it turned out, rubidium and cesium were two new alkali metals. The rubidium atom contains thirty-seven electrons in five shells: 2, 8, 18, 8, 1; while the cesium atom contains fifty-five electrons in six shells: 2, 8, 18, 18, 8, 1. The five alkali metals are summarized in Table 1.

*Table 1*

| *Alkali Metal* | *Total Electrons (Atomic number)* | *Electron Distribution* |
|---|---|---|
| Lithium | 3 | 2, 1 |
| Sodium | 11 | 2, 8, 1 |
| Potassium | 19 | 2, 8, 8, 1 |
| Rubidium | 37 | 2, 8, 18, 8, 1 |
| Cesium | 55 | 2, 8, 18, 18, 8, 1 |

That one electron in the outermost shell explains just about everything about the alkali metals. The outermost electron (negatively charged) is held very weakly by the positively charged nucleus at the atomic center, so it is easily removed, leaving a singly charged positive atomic fragment ("ion") behind. The alkali elements are therefore easier to "ionize" than any other metals are.

What's more, as we go up the scale of atomic number, that outermost electron becomes easier and easier to remove since there are more and more inner electrons to insulate that outermost one from the nucleus. Cesium is therefore easier to ionize than any of the other elements in Table 1.

This is interesting in connection with an "ionic drive" for spaceships. To get out of the atmosphere and away from the immediate neighborhood of a planet requires the brute force of a chemical reaction. Once out in free space, however, instead of using heat to hurl exhaust gases out a nozzle at moderate speeds, you can use an electromagnetic field to flip out ions at nearly the speed of light. Since ions are so light, the acceleration is only gradual, but it mounts up. Cesium, as the easiest substance to ionize is the

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most efficient material for an ion drive and one gram of cesium, converted into ions and emitted, will slowly build up an acceleration at least 140 times as great as that produced by the burning of one gram of any known fuel.

The fact that the outermost alkali-metal electron is so easily removed, and that chemical reactions involve electron transfers, means that the alkali metals undergo reactions particularily readily. They are chemically active substances. For instance, they are among the few substances that react with water, tearing away the oxygen atoms in the water molecule, combining with those oxygen molecules and liberating free hydrogen.

The reactivity increases with atomic number. Thus, lithium reacts with water in rather sober fashion, but sodium does so more vigorously. Sodium liberates hydrogen and heat in such quantities that ignition becomes a simple matter, and a "sodium fire" is all too easy to bring about.

Despite this, sodium metal is used as a reagent in organic chemistry (to dry organic liquids with which sodium does not react, but where the metal will combine with and remove every last trace of water present, for instance). When I took graduate organic chemistry, the class was warned in detail about the possibility of sodium fires, and the promise was made that anyone who started one would be permanently dropped from the class. I paled at the threat because I knew perfectly well that if there was even *one* sodium fire in the class, it would be mine. Fortunately, there were none at all and I survived.

Potassium reacts so vigorously with water that the heat of the action ignites the hydrogen at once. Rubidium is even more active and cesium explodes on contact with water and will react even with ice at temperatures down to -116 C. Rubidium and cesium will also react rapidly with oxygen and catch fire spontaneously on exposure to air.

The outermost electron of the alkali metal atoms has interesting consequences even when it stays where it belongs. It is held so weakly by the central nucleus that, compared with other electrons of its own and other atoms, it bellies out and takes up an extraordinary amount of room. This means that when the alkali metal atoms come together to form a solid chunk of matter, the atoms are widely spaced and there are relatively few nuclei for a given volume. In other words, the alkali metals posses usually small densities, see Table 2.

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*Table 2*

| *Alkali Metal* | *Density (grams per cubic centimeter)* |
|---|---|
| Lithium | 0.534 |
| Sodium | 0.971 |
| Potassium | 0.862 |
| Rubidium | 1.532 |
| Cesium | 1.873 |

In general, density depends both upon the mass of the individual atomic nuclei and on the arrangement of those nuclei. The mass of the nucleus goes up with the atomic number so that the density rises as one goes up the list of alkali metals. A more open arrangement of atoms allows potassium to be less dense than sodium.

Even the densest of the metals listed in Table 2 is only a little denser than magnesium, which is the least dense of metals capable of being used in construction (alkali metals are not). Rubidium is well under magnesium's mark of 1.738 grams per cubic centimeter and the remaining alkali metals are still less dense.

The density of water is 1.000 grams per cubic centimeter, so that lithium, sodium and potassium are less dense than water and would float in it. (In fact, the poor chemistry student who inadvertently tosses some waste sodium into the sink will, in the few moments before the fire starts and he sees his career shaken to its foundations, watch the little bits of silvery metal hissing, spinning, and floating on the water.)

Sodium and potassium are generally kept under kerosene, for safety's sake. Kerosene, made up of inert hydrocarbon molecules, has a density of about 0.75 grams per cubic centimeter so that sodium and potassium sink in kerosene and rest comfortably at the bottom of the bottle. Lithium, less dense still, would float in kerosene. It is only slightly more than half as dense as water and is the least dense of all the metals.

That bulky outermost electron is easily pushed inward (well comparatively) so that the alkali metals are usually compressible for solids. Cesium is the most compressible of all those we have considered.

The feebly-held outermost electron can easily drift from atom to atom, which is what is required for conducting heat and electricity. The alkali metals do very well in this respect but are exceeded by copper, silver and gold, which also have a single electron in an outermost shell — but under somewhat different conditions that allow them to remain non-reactive and dense.

The outermost electron, all alone and feebly held, performs the

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function of binding two neighboring atoms only indifferently well. The atoms don't remain in place very rigidly, and the alkali metals are, therefore, soft and waxy, lithium the least so. In using sodium metal in the laboratory I well remember squeezing it through a "sodium press" by muscle power, and watching it squirt out like rather stiff tooth-paste.

Although the single outermost electron holds atoms together well enough to make the alkali metals solid at 25 C, they do so only barely. The alkali metals, as a class, are low-melting; see Table 3.

*Table 3*

| *Alkali Metal* | *Melting Point (C.)* |
|---|---|
| Lithium | 179 |
| Sodium | 97.8 |
| Potassium | 63.6 |
| Rubidium | 38.9 |
| Cesium | 28.5 |

The melting point goes down as the atomic number goes up, and the outermost electron is held more and more weakly. By the time you reach rubidium, you have a melting point at a temperature only 9 degrees above that which melts gallium. As for cesium, that melts at a temperature 1.3 degrees *below* that which melts gallium. Of all the metals whose melting points have been measured, cesium ranks lowest after mercury. It melts at a temperature only 3.5 degrees above 25 C., and in terms of Fahrenheit its melting point is only 83.3.

Yet, by the standards I have set, cesium is solid and it would seem that mercury and bromine remain the only two liquid elements.

But wait, who says that there are only five alkali metals? If one works up the list of elements from cesium, one comes eventually to an element with an atomic weight of 87; one with 87 electrons in its nucleus, distributed as follows: 2, 8, 18, 32, 18, 8, 1. It, too, is an alkali metal — lying beyond cesium.

Element number 87 was not discovered until 1939, when it was detected by the French chemist, Marguerite Perey, who was purifying a sample of the radioactive element, actinium. The new element was named "francium" after Perey's native land.

As it happens, francium is not a stable element. Not one of its known isotopes is stable, and there is no chance that there exists an unknown one that could be stable. The least unstable isotope is francium-223, and that has a half-life of not more than 21 minutes. This means that only minute traces of francium can possibly exist on Earth, and only minute traces of

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francium can possibly be created in the laboratory. The very concept of sizable chunks of solid francium is unrealistic, for its rate of breakdown would yield enough energy to vaporize any reasonable piece.

Consequently, we cannot work out the physical properties of francium metal by direct observation, and it is never listed along with the other alkali metals when data is given as in the tables in this article.

Yet we can work out its properties by analogy. If we could pretend that francium was a stable alkali metal, we could say, with considerable assurance, that it would be even more active than cesium, that it would explode on contact with water, and so on. We could be sure that francium hydroxide would be more alkaline than cesium hydroxide, that francium would be a good conductor of heat and electricity, that it would ionize more readily than cesium, be softer and more compressible, that it would form a whole list of compounds analogous to those of the other alkali metals and so on.

And what about the melting point of francium? In Table 3, we saw that the melting point goes down as the alkali metal atomic number goes up. From lithium to sodium, the drop is 81.2 degrees; from sodium to potassium it is 34.2 degrees; from potassium to rubidium it is 24.7 degrees; from rubidium to cessium it is 10.4 degrees. It is fair to suppose that the drop from cesium to francium would be at least 5 degrees.

In that case, the melting point of francium is quite likely to be 23 C, and by the arbitrary standards we have been using it would be considered a liquid — the third liquid element.

And is that all, or can we still go on beyond francium in the list of elements. So far, all the elements up to 105 either occur in nature or have been prepared in the laboratory, and chemists are trying to form atoms of still higher atomic numbers. We would have to reach element number 119, however, to find a seventh alkali metal.

We might call element 119 "eka-francium" ("eka" is the Sanskrit word for "one" and it is routinely used for an undiscovered element one beyond a particular analog). Eka-francium would have an electron arrangement of: 2, 8, 18, 32, 32, 18, 8, 1, and it would have all the alkali metal properties in even more advanced degree than cesium and francium. It would certainly be a fourth liquid element if its undoubtedly enormous instability were ignored.*

**Element 118 would be a seventh noble gas, "eka-radon." Its boiling point would be about -20 C. and it would be a twelfth gaseous element. Just thought I'd mention it.*

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**Fred Pohl's new story has uncommon range and depth and is worth your careful attention. It considers several variations of the theme of first contact: loving versions, violent versions; take your pick...**

# The Mother Trip

## by FREDERIK POHL

It could have been this way: that the Get of Moolkri Mawkri could have landed in a faster-than-light spaceship resembling an artichoke on the outskirts of Jackson, Mississippi.

In this version Mawkri gathers her Get-cluster around her broodingly, while Moolkri assumes the shape of a man. The Get has studied all of the Earth's TV programs while they were in orbit, and they have picked an average person for Moolkri to be, not too tall, not too symmetrical, not too *dyezhnizt* (a term in their language which relates to the proportion between upper and middle circumferences). The Get is satisfied with Moolkri's appearance, but all the same it is pretty funny looking. They laugh as he exits the spacecraft to explore.

Moolkri has well assimilated TV lore, and so he knows how to behave in a way appropriate to his body. He hooks his "thumbs" in his "belt," crosses a deserted bridge and strides swaggeringly down the light-saturated and totally uninhabited street.

It does not seem unusual to Moolkri that there should be no one gazing into the bright shop windows. He does not have a very good grasp of what is usual or unusual for human beings. It is late at night, and so a human being (or at least one from another city than Jackson) might find it strange that everything was so brightly lit. Contrariwise, a human might consider it odd that, with every amenity turned on for shoppers, there was not a single strolling person to be seen. Moolkri does not realize this is strange. He is aware that sometimes streets are deserted and sometimes not; he is also aware that sometimes they are bright and sometimes dark; he is simply not aware that deserted is not really



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compatible with well-lit, but then there is a lot he is not aware of about the Earth.

So Moolkri swings, gunman wide, his "chaps" rustling against each other and his "bandanna" bright against his "neck." He slouches past the People's Cut Rate Pharmacy and Bette's New York Boutique and the Yazoo-Jackson Consolidated All-Faith Ashram, looking in the windows. He reads a typed notice about a lost Australian terrier. He inspects a naked black dummy with no hands, waiting for the window dresser to return in the morning and give her hands and ball gown. It is all interesting to him, and back in the spaceship Mawkri and her Get chatter excitedly among themselves, forgetting to be afraid as they receive his impressions.

It is not only his sense of vision that is active; it is also his sense of hearing, although that input does not produce much he considers worth noting. There are no voices, no footsteps. Overheard there is the sound of a motor, which he identifies easily enough as a helicopter. It is too far away for him to care much. He does not realize that it is quartering the city, alert for the sight of stray humans on the broad, bright street. He does not hear the radio message that the helicopter pilot transmits to the ground. Back in the spaceship the rest of the Get could have heard it, did in fact register the radio signal as an artifact originating nearby, but they did not associate the message with Moolkri.

Then the black-and-white slides silently around the corner. There is only one policeman in it. They are not expecting riots of mad killers, only the odd break-and-grab hoodlum or the hopeful would-be-mugger. Moolkri hears the prowl car. First he hears the faint purr of the motor and whisper of tires, then, only in the last moment before it skids to a stop beside him, the quick bleat of its siren. He turns to look. The young cop leaps out. "Hands against the wall! Spread your feet! Hold it right there!" He does not say it like that precisely; there is brushwood and bayou in his accent, but Moolkri is not attuned to regional distinctions of dialect. Moolkri submits. It is unfortunate, but it is all right. He has been ready to submit to human violence, in case it should develop, ever since he accepted the assignment to explore. Now it appears that he will not return to the Get, but he does not mind that. The Get will continue. He does not feel as though he were in danger. He only feels rage, and his rage races decisively, by means of his fourth and seventh senses, across the world and into the heavens.

In the spacecraft Mawkri

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mourns. The Get moves fearfully around her. She had wished to extend her motherhood to this planet, but it had rejected her. It was unfortunate since, among other things, it meant the end of sexual intercourse for her for the rest of her life, but she does not protest, only regrets.

Moolkri opens all of the tactile inputs he has bothered to connect in order to perceive the policeman fully. He observes stimuli identified as pain, heat, body disorientation and sex climax denied as the policeman's hand invades his body spaces. There turns out to be nothing in the "pockets," nothing at all; Moolkri had never realized anything should be put there.

Out of curiosity (he is over-developed in curiosity, that is why he is here), Moolkri increases his audio perception and, translating easily from the peckerwood English, hears the policeman radio in to see if there is a want on an unidentified white male pedestrian wearing a cowboy suit, about fifty, five feet seven, white beard, bald, blue eyes, no visible scars.

Listening in this way is only curiosity on Moolkri's part. It can no longer affect the outcome, since violence has already been done to him. He waits patiently, not very long. He hears headquarters report that there is no want on the described individual. The policeman tells Moolkri he can go. Moolkri adds to his file the datum that the violence has been withdrawn, but only out of neatness. The file is now complete. No more will be added.

The policeman cautions him against walking alone in the city at night, mentioning the risk of being robbed or harmed. He advises Moolkri to carry identification at all times. He gets back into his car, hesitates, then says, with half a smile and a cursory salute, "Y'all enjoy your stay in Jackson now, hear?"

But it is too late.

The automatic orbiting guardians have already reacted to Moolkri's broadcast danger of violence, as they were programmed to do. The spacecraft with Mawkri and the Get lifts and flees screaming into the sky. And the first planet-busters begin to drop.

Fusion infernos blossom and burst. Cities slide into the already boiling sea. Mawkri's motherhood has punished the offense.

It is the end of the world of human beings, except as a blob of molten rock, and that is one way it could have been.

Or it could have been like this, that all of Moolkri Mawkri's Get remained in orbit, thundering down motherly orders to be obeyed:

Under pain of destruction!

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Humans are commanded!

Alternative is the planet-busters, and the end of your world!

In this version the Get prudently refrained from landing but, after careful study of all radio and television transmissions, elected to play a mother's arduous role from out in space. So they made a plan and ordered the world to carry it out. Six representatives of humankind were to present themselves, unarmed and tractable, in orbit: One each from China, the United States, Sweden, Rhodesia, Brazil and the U.S.S.R.

The Get, here, too, had carefully studied all the EMF transmissions from Tokyo Tower and London's GPO and the American networks. The Get thought that most of them were very funny. Nevertheless, they decoded them into aural and visual signals and analyzed them for meaning and implications.

Both Moolkri and Mawkri agreed that this complicatedly comic planet needed to be taken into the motherhood of Mawkri, and in this version they studied the means of manipulation nations and persons used upon each other. They were aware of the human custom of giving each other ultimatums: thus the commands from space. They were not as aware of certain other human habits. They were taken quite by surprise when, united in a common purpose at last, all six of the nations that had a nuclear missile capability conferred through their secret hot lines, set a time and fired simultaneously upon the orbiting spaceship of Moolkri Mawkri and the Get.

Of the resulting swarm of missiles it happened to be a cold-launched American Minuteman III that destroyed the ship, the Get, Moolkri and Mawkri herself, and ended the first contact between their people and ours.

There is, however, a warmer and more loving version.

In this version Moolkri spoke up:

"I do not think we can trust ourselves to these creatures," he said. "Neither do I think we should reveal ourselves to them, either for communication or to impose our helpful will on them. Let's cool it while we figure things out."

There was some resistance to this, particularly from a forensicist and a KP-pusher in the Get. That was right and proper. It was their function to do that. The forensicist was charged with debating all devil's-advocate positions that no one really cared to espouse, and she was very good at it. The KP-pusher (who was not really called that, but none of their words are much like ours) was detailed to making things happen. He *always* urged action, so

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that nothing desirable would fail to be done simply because no one bothered to make it occur. Nevertheless, in this version Moolkri prevailed upon the rest of the Get to lie low in orbit, and so they did while drones and far-watchers made a saturation study of one small area of the planet. It was near Arcata, California.

Moolkri became aware, in this version, as he had never otherwise been made aware during his sheltered life in the Get-cluster, that the universe was a diversity of things. Oh, they had seen other races. They had been journeying for many subjective years, while the Get spawned and grew and matured; they were near the end of their journey now, near the time when the Get would have to return to their home to disperse and mate. But these bipeds were unusual. Some of them were hairy, some were bald. Skeletally, they were quite the same (bar the occasional malfunction or amputee), but in size and in weight they differed. Their fragrances, the drones reported, came in a wide variety of osmic frequences, most of them not very nice.

It was in behavior, however, that the bipeds exhibited the most amazing diversity. It was not only that one biped differed from another. The same biped might behave in differing ways at differing times! They found and labeled one who was clearly a KP-pusher; an hour later, she was an empathizer!

Semantic analysis of their communications to each other was equally confusing. Some of the bipeds were agressively mission-oriented within themselves:

"I'm a *woman,* not a *doll.*" (Throwing a wastepaper basket at the male lying in the bed.) "I've got twenty-two years of *rage* inside me because of this mother trip you lay on me!" (Slamming a door.)

Moolkri played that tape five times to make sure he had understood it, marveling, for only a few minutes before it had seemed this pair were preparing to procreate.

Some of the bipeds were role-playing; that is, their mission was assigned from context:

"Now, gentlemen, please!" (Big expression of the lips and corners of the eyes called "smile.") "*You* know that under the American system my client is entitled to the presumption of innocence." (Eyes turned directly into a television camera.) "You gentlemen can try this case in your newspapers all you like — and I'm not saying you shouldn't; you have a right to freedom of expression, and I approve that right! — but the State of California will decide my client's guilt or innocence, not you."

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(Decisive up and down movement of the chin and head.)

None of the Get understood any of this, and they stirred and muttered in their cluster. The forensicist proposed immediate annihilation of the planet. No one agreed, but still — But still, how could such persons live?

Among Moolkri Mawkri's people, person could not be separated from mission. They were the same thing. What a person was was what he did. It was the foreseen need for mission operators that determined how a person was nurtured; it was the nature of their aptitudes that decided which was chosen for what purpose. There was no such thing as a split personality in the Get. There was no one who was unhappy with his life. Moolkri could not play a role. He was always typecast. He could never attempt to change his image. He *was* his image.

The Get of Moolkri Mawkri came from a planet of the star Procyon, blue-white and burning. It was a deadly dangerous star, and it was only the dense, damp clouds in their atmosphere that kept the radiation from cremating every one of them at birth. Humans, of course, were physically repulsive to them. Humans did not have armored claws or vibrissae. Humans had only twelve senses, not nineteen, and two of the senses they did have ("pain" and "heat") seemed ridiculously unimportant to the Get. The Get clustered together, interlocking mouthhooks touching spiracles, and murmured to each other reassuringly and lovingly. (They didn't know it was lovingly; they had no way to relate to each other that was anything but loving). They shuddered in apprehension at the physical qualities of humans. Humans seemed so *deformed.*

Of course, even the Get sometimes fell short of physical perfection. Moolkri himself had a birth defect that damaged his second instar. Their wisest evaluator lacked a limb, and so he would never be a breeder. (Therefore, he would never want to.) But all of the Get had the power to change their shape when they wanted to. Humans did not seem to have that power. They were condemned to inhabit forever the bodies they were born to, except for such rude mechanical devices as they used to replace teeth or assist sight, or for the daubs of paint and odor-producing substances that some humans employed to enhance their natural appearance. This seemed a terrible punishment to the Get.

But they tried not to judge. They had seen other races and, compared to them, none seemed particularly attractive, and most were awful.

East of Arcata the road leaps

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rivers, looping through the foothills. There stands a long, low clapboard building with some of the windows replaced with plywood. It is more than a hundred years old. It wears its history in every scar. All day the logging trucks thunder down past it out of the Klamath Mountains, continuing their long-term systematic eradication of the redwood forests. Three of them have gone out of control and plunged through one corner of the building or another in the past thirty years.

No one wants to live in this house; it is like living next to the Number One pin in a bowling alley. The porch stops short at the northwest corner. An 800-horsepower diesel tractor carried that piece of it away in 1968. The 9-foot log it was towing minced the driver's head; you can still see stains on the clapboard. The sign in front of the house now says:

Klamath Valley Center
for Development of
Human Potential

One of Moolkri's drones had buzzed all around it for more than seven days, cataloging the human creatures as well as the other fauna of the area (dragonflies, moths, rabbits, twenty-three kinds of birds, forty reptiles and amphibia, microorganisms past counting). There were sixteen of the humans, and they were playing a game.

The Get understood games. They enjoyed play. They even understood consciousness-raising games; those were the only games they ever played, except for athletic ones like vibrissa-trilling and obstacle-scuttling. They discovered the name of the human game as "Primal Weekend," which meant nothing to the, but watching the game itself was a grand spectator sport. The cluster squirmed itself into such position that all several score of them could see clearly into one monitor or another. They studied the pictures the drone was transmitting with, for the first time since they had approached this messy little G-type star, a certain empathy and joy.

Some of the aspects of the game were peculiarly ludicrous to them. Not threatening. Just funny; and they laughed and laughed, in their way. (They did not know that some of the aspects would have been ludicrous to most humans, too... not necessarily the same aspects.) For instance, there was a game in which fifteen of the players locked arms and braced hips in a tight ring, while the sixteenth, sobbing and fighting, struggled to get into the group. How funny they thought the notion that any group might try to keep a member out! Another game involved a 41-year-old-male player, who rinsed out a pair of his underdrawers in a bucket while all the others squatted in a circle

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around him, calling out words of encouragement and love. (He had soiled himself in a passion of weeping and writhing a few minutes before.) The symbolism of this game was perfectly apparent to the Get, and they responded not with laughter but with understanding and joy.

But others games troubled the Get immensely.

The weekenders played the game called Psychodrama a lot. In one of the episodes two humans squatted facing each other, again in the circle of the ring. "I'm your wife," said one cheerfully. "I castrate you." Her voice grew more threatening. "You're not a real man!" She spat the words. "If you were half a man, you'd beat me black and blue!"

"I want to, I want to," sobbed the male player. "I can't, I can't."

"Then I'm going to leave you," shrilled the female one, and, "You mustn't, you mustn't," wept the male.

The Get revolved uneasily, changing grips and communicating fearfully. They could not take their eyes off the monitors. They felt ill and damanged, in ways they had never felt before. They listened with sick fascination to the translations of the audio track: "Kill her, Ben!" shouted the players in the ring. "Walk out on her! Hey, Ben, slap her with the plastic bat!"

*Walk out on her?*

The Get shivered. They could find no empathy whatever in the situation. Even their empathizers merely shook in fear. A mated coule planning to *split?* How could that *be?*

Among Moolkri and Mawkri's people, you see, such a thing is impossible. It is not statute or custom. It is natural law. When a seed-planter like Moolkri intromits an egg-ripener like Mawkri, the fertilization takes the form of a sort of allergic reaction. The Get that result are, in a sense, only hives.

Intromission plays more than a merely reproductive function with them, as screwing does with us. But the biology of it is ironclad. At first sexual encounter each partner builds up specific antigens. They cannot produce offspring without them. They can never have sexual intercourse with any other. The antigens produced from any other mating, or from intercourse with an unmated person, would kill them immediately, in great, bloated, pustulant pain.

There is, therefore, no question of sexual morality among the Get or their planet-gotten. It is a boy-meets-girl world, a Cinderella planet on which, when the prince discovers that She is The One, they do indeed live happily together ever after, or else they do not live happily (or at all). They do not have

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the option of promiscuity. They have only one source of sexual pleasure. One partner for life.

And of course they only produce a get once — subsequent intromissions are sterile, though a lot of fun — but as there are up to 500 individuals in each get (more than half dying in the first half hour), the race goes on and grows.

So the Get were shocked and terrified, and some of them even made physically ill, by this inexplicable vice their specimens displayed. Their medical members were kept furiously busy, scuttling around the cluster to tend the damaged ones, when they were not too damaged to function themselves.

Moolkri and Mawkri's people are no better than human beings. Their first reaction was total revulsion and a wish to destroy, like a stamp of a four-year-old foot on a spider. Their collective claws were trembling near the clasps for the planet-busters when one of the smallest of the Get, and usually one of the quietest, piped up, sobbing:

"But they can't help it."

Through a warped window both sides look strange to each other. Humans looked strange to Moolkri Mawkri's Get. Now consider how strange the Get look to us:

"They can't help it" is a concept none had ever heard.

They chattered wonderingly for a while, and as they talked, the claws withdrew from the buster-clasps. *They can't help it.* It was so strange a thought that it seemed to excuse almost any perversion, even promiscuity. And then an observer, restlessly examining the environment, cried, "Look what they're doing!" And they all quieted and stared at the monitors, still faithfully conveying what was happening at the Klamath Valley Center for the Development of Human Potential, and there they found an empathy they had not expected.

One corner of the building was an add-on shed of tarpaper and sheet metal, extending over a concrete pool.

A century and more before, some hungry and hopeful men had channeled a creek into a sluice in order to pick flakes of gold out of the water. They hadn't found much, but they had kept trying, relays of them for a couple of decades, and each one had deepened and widened the channel and the pool.

Now the gold was all gone, geologists having tracked the stream to its source and ripped out the auriferous rock that had given its flakes to the stream, but the pool was still there. The Center had cemented its bottom and covered its top and put in a heater. Now it

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was kept at hot-blood temperature (the Get liked that, it reminded them of home), and in it all sixteen of the humans (their coverings gone, only their hides still enclosing them) were knotted and seething together in the amniotic waters (the Get liked that too, it reminded them of their own cluster). The name of the game the people played in the water was Float. Naked and touching, they formed a chain. "Pass 'er down," cried the ones at the lower end, and at the top two humans picked up a third and slid her passively, relaxedly, half floating and half supported, touched and soothed and caressed, from hand to hand through the warm pool.

The Get chittered among themselves. It was almost like a Get-cluster, the touching and the support. It was almost inviting enough to join; and perhaps it was not the fault of the humans that they did not have mouthhooks or spiracles so that they could join together properly.

"They can't be all bad," mused the little Get-sibling aloud. And he spoke for all of them.

"I think," said Moolkri, reaching over to glance at Mawkri for concurrence, "that we should study these people more. I do not know what to do," he added.

"We cannot stay very long," warned a rememberer. They all knew it was true. They had been a long time traveling. The Get was ripening, it was time to return home and seek partners.

And still they could not leave yet, they had to learn more. The drones were busy, busy, and the far-watchers turned their electronic sensors onto the world of human society (Washington, Mowcow, Peking) and human science (Arecibo, Tyuratam-baikonur, and the Moon) and human relations (bedroom, bathroom, bus). Many things happened while they watched. A war broke out. It was in a part of the planet that none of the Get would really have thought worth fighting over, except that it held some large reserves of liquid hydrocarbon. ("But so easy to carry it somewhere else," marveled a commenter.) Nevertheless, tens of thousands of humans died. Millions were hurt, or frightened, or impaired in some way. This part of the event amused the Get. It was so *silly*. ("But I wonder if *they* think it's funny," queried the little one, laughing.) Drought and famine struck large patches of three continents. The Get observed this mass death with curiosity, but their emotions were not involved. After all, they were used to half their siblings dying before the rest of any get were old enough to preen themselves.

And then they turned off the

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far-watchers and recalled the drones, and they clustered and thought before they spoke.

"Human beings," said the Get-member in charge of summarizing, "are clearly self-destructive. It is what their 'psychology' calls a 'death wish.' Unchecked, they will wipe themselves out."

"Talk sense," begged the little sibling. (Moolkri gave him a playful, partly disciplinary bite.) "No, I mean it," the little one went on. "They *act* as if they're going to destroy themselves. But, you know? They never have."

A judger responded: "That is true." A theorizer added, "What is causality for us may not be for them."

This concept caused consternation among the Get, but it seemed to fit the facts. "What then shall we do?" asked Moolkri. "We don't have very much time. Mawkri has stopped accepting intromission. She is near the time of her death, and I cannot be far."

"We'll miss you," said several of the Get together, sorrowful not for their parents but for themselves. "Let us then decide."

A proposer stated: "We have several choices. We can exterminate them." Instant contractile movements from all, signifying 'no.' "We can help them to be more like us — but how? I have no proposal for this." Quivering movements from the cluster, signifying inability to respond, a request to go on. "Or," he said, "we can leave them alone."

"Stale, stale," murmured the Get. But the judger piped up:

"I think not. Let us hear more."

"We can go away without any further intervention at all," went on the proposer. "We can leave one of our drones in orbit, programmed for Home. Then if one of their craft should someday find it, and if they wish, they can come to us. If not — not."

Mawkri cried feebly, "But a mother must care for all!"

"Mawkri," said the proposer, trembling, "your care has given us life. But the humans are not like us. They must make their mistakes if they will. It is how they learn."

And the judger confirmed wonderingly: "It is how they learn. We can do nothing to help. We can only wish them well...and wait."

And so the ship shaped like an artichoke turned on its axis, swallowed all its satellites but one and retreated toward the constellation Canis Minor. And not an eye, not an interferometer, not a Schmidt ever saw it go.

There is still another version, in which Moolkri Mawkri's Get never reach Earth at all. In fact, they never leave their home planet. None

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of their people do. All the proliferating gets stay locked and squirming in their dense, damp viny nests until they ripen and seek partners. Technology? Yes, they build technology. They learn the workings of their own cellular biology and the devising of medicines. They learn to keep alive that half of every get which would otherwise die. They learn to tame the tangle vines, and finally to live without them, for there is then not enough space on their world for any kind of life at all, except their own. They learn to tunnel the planet's crust for living space and to harness the scattered heat of Procyon to drive engines to make new nests. They devise a sort of plastic — made from their excrement, their bodies once they have died, and the simple elements of the rocks — and they create new living spaces from it. They never reach out into space. They never taste the stars. They never got to Earth. They live forever (or until this version runs out of program) locked into their one small world, and nothing that happens anywhere else has anything to do with them. They do not kill, or spare, or help, or trust. And they do not receive any of those things from others.

But what is the use of a life that never reaches out to touch another? Never to hurt or help? Never to feel or, or even to see? No, it is not a very interesting version. We never play that one any more.

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## L. A. 2000

The Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, currently the world's oldest s-f club with meetings since October 1934, is about to hold its two thousandth meeting on Thursday, December 11th. To celebrate the occasion, the LASFS is organizing a conference, "L.A. 2000: a Science Fantasy Conference", which will take place over the weekend of December 6th-7th at the International Hotel at Los Angeles International Airport. For further details, contact the LASFS at Freehafter Hall, 11360 Ventura Blvd., Studio City, CA 91604 (where it meets each Thursday at 8:00 p.m.).

**Results of Competition 11 will appear in the November issue.**

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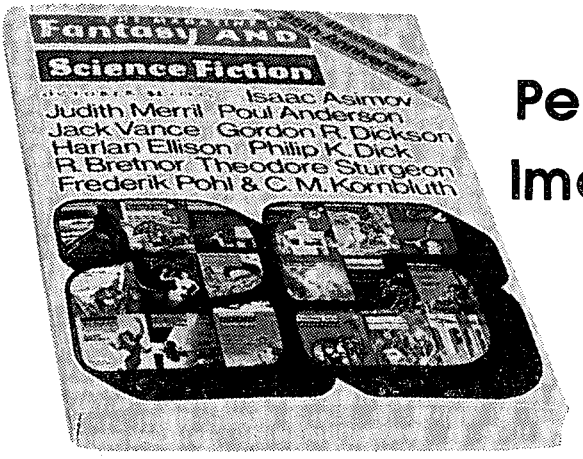


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R. (for Reginald) BRETNOR lives in Oregon and has been writing and editing fantasy and sf for more than thirty years. His most recent book is *Science Fiction, Today and Tomorrow* (Harper). He had a story in the second issue of F&SF (Winter-Spring, 1950), and his latest story, "The Pearcey Boy," begins on page 77.

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